Hearing the Silence:
A Legacy of Postmodernism

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HEARING THE SILENCE: A LEGACY OF POSTMODERNISM

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RÉSUMÉ
À l'écoute du silence : un héritage du postmodernisme

Au cours des trente dernières années, le roman postmoderne canadien a beaucoup évolué. On remarque que les œuvres successives d'auteurs généralement reconnus comme faisant partie du mouvement postmoderniste évoluent avec le temps. Bien que ceci soit sans doute vrai de tous les auteurs qui écrivent pendant une certaine période de temps, la présente thèse s'intéresse aux effets de ce phénomène sur le postmodernisme. Par exemple, Blowen Figures d'Audrey Thomas est souvent perçu comme un prototype du roman postmoderne canadien. Entre Blowen Figures (1974) et Coming Down From Wa (1995), les changements de style sont importants, tout comme le laps de temps qui s'est écoulé entre la publication de ces deux romans. Le style de Coming Down From Wa utilise plusieurs des tendances littéraires qui font partie du postmodernisme : d'abord une préoccupation pour la possibilité d'une « histoire vraie » et une interrogation sur son existence. Cependant, on remarque l'absence d'un style radical - absence de scénario ou d'intrigue, ajout d'annonces publicitaires, d'articles de journaux et d'éléments folkloriques - que l'on pouvait observer dans Blowen Figures.

discontinuité, perçues comme des caractéristiques du postmodernisme par des critiques comme Linda Hutcheon et Janet Paterson, sont moins prononcées dans les œuvres ultérieures de plusieurs auteurs.

Le changement le plus évident est la réaffirmation de l'intrigue ou de l'histoire. Aux premières étapes du mouvement, la fragmentation et la discontinuité avaient leur propre raison d'être comme techniques pour souligner le fait qu'une histoire était en train de se créer. Mais aussitôt la raison d'être accomplie, le devoir de raconter l'histoire redevient important en soi.

Observer le retour du scénario cohérent dans les œuvres postmodernes soulève d'autres questions. Entre autres, quels aspects du postmodernisme ont été retenus pour permettre à l'histoire de refaire surface sans tout simplement retourner au style d'avant le postmodernisme? Un héritage majeur du postmodernisme est la notion que le silence génère à la fois crainte et fascination. Ceci est sans doute dû en grande partie au poststructuralisme tel que défini par Jacques Derrida, d’une part, de même qu’à l’interrogation postmoderne de la métanarration telle que définie par Jean-François Lyotard, d’autre part. Derrida a beaucoup exploré le caractère ambigu de la langue à son niveau le plus primordial. Lyotard, de son côté, a étudié l’ambiguïté des textes que l’humanité considère comme « autorité ». Si on accepte ces théories comme raisonnables, alors toutes les formes de communication deviennent suspectes. Le seul choix qui reste à l'auteur est de travailler dans le cadre de modes de communication qui se sont avérés déficients ou de demeurer silencieux.
Le silence est souvent perçu, dans les romans antérieurs, comme une solution de rechange fort séduisante, mais périlleuse. Bien qu'on laisse ouverte la possibilité d'assigner au silence des aspects positifs, l'attrait principal semble être celui de l'absolu. On est tenté d'abandonner l'effort exigé par la communication en faveur du silence absolu. Dans la première vague de romans postmodernes, plusieurs des protagonistes, de même que quelques-uns des personnages secondaires, disparaissaient littéralement dans le silence. Ces notions de silence comme absolu s'accompagnaient de fragmentation et de discontinuité dans la narration et dans la voix. Le silence des œuvres ultérieures est devenu moins un vide dans lequel des choses disparaissent, mais plutôt un endroit où l'on peut entendre plusieurs voix. Dans toutes ces œuvres, des premières aux dernières, la lutte pour faire entendre une voix est gardée soigneusement en équilibre avec le danger et l'attrait du silence.

L'idée d'examiner le silence en utilisant des mots semble paradoxale. Cependant la littérature qui démontre un intérêt pour le silence n'est pas née avec le postmodernisme; au contraire, son histoire est longue et variée. Pour les fins de cette étude, nous avons identifié six formes de silence : le silence absolu, le silence personnel, le silence obligé, le silence profond, le silence du secret et le silence de l'absence. Nous avons adapté ici des termes empruntés à Simon Sibelman, à Joanne Cockelreas et à Bernard Dauenhaur.

Le silence absolu indique un recul complet de la langue. Que ce soit volontaire ou non, aussitôt fait, ce recul devient irréversible. Le silence personnel est un cocon de silence que chaque individu amène avec
lui ou elle. Contrairement au silence absolu, on peut entrer ou sortir
du silence personnel à sa guise et s’en servir pour se réfugier ou pour
se défendre. Le silence obligé a un effet négatif sur toute personne ou
tout groupe dont la voix a été supprimée, généralement par une personne
ou un groupe perçu comme étant plus puissant. Le résultat est une voix
inauthentique. L’expression « silence profond » est empruntée à Bernard
Dauenhaur. C’est un silence qui laisse la place au développement
d’autres choses. La méditation bouddhiste, tout comme certaines formes
de prières chrétiennes, en sont des exemples. Le silence attentif décrit
par King-Kok Cheung fait partie de cette catégorie. Le silence du secret
est plus commun parmi ceux qui risquent de perdre quelque chose en
parlant. Les causes de ce type de silence sont la peur de perdre sa
réputation ou sa liberté, ou l’aliénation de son public. Le silence de
l’absence survient lorsqu’un personnage est important dans une histoire
mais n’y apparaît pas. Le silence de ce personnage devient ainsi un
élément complexe de l’histoire.

Il ne faut pas oublier l’importance du rôle de la langue dans
 cette discussion. Que la langue et le silence soient opposés ou
 complémentaires, ils sont liés de façon complexe. Les termes langue et
 parole sont utilisés à la fois ici. La langue fait référence à toute
 forme de communication humaine; elle est de nature quelque peu
 théorique. La parole est l’utilisation d’une langue particulière.

Dans Coming Through Slaughter, Michael Ondaatje utilise des
 techniques postmodernes de façon moins flagrante que ne le fait Audrey
 Thomas, mais il les utilise quand même. Cependant, comme plusieurs des
 premiers romans postmodernes, dans Blown Figures, Thomas se préoccupe


discute aussi de la possibilité que le silence ait des usages plus bienveillants que ceux présentés dans Le Désert mauve.

ABSTRACT

Although there would seem to be a paradox involved, the practice of examining silence through literature actually has a long and varied history. There are examples to be found in the work of Mallarmé and the other symbolists of the 19th century. Views of silence change from one society to another and one age to the next. Where Canadian and Québécois postmodernism are concerned there is a difference in the treatment of silence in early postmodern novels and its treatment in later postmodern novels by the same authors. Early novels treat silence as a fascinating albeit frightening alternative to language which has been disappointing. In later novels language and its effects are still under scrutiny but silence is viewed as more of a companion to language than an alternative.

Along with the shift in the view of silence, there is a change in narrative style from early to late postmodern novels. Early novels were marked by fragmentation and discontinuity. Later novels show a distinct return to a more coherent storyline. Michael Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) and *The English Patient* (1993) provide the clearest example of these changes. Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* provides a clear illustration postmodern styles and concerns. Although the difference between his early and later work is not as extreme as some, his novels, nonetheless, demonstrate the same sort of evolution of postmodernism. Nicole Brossard brings a decidedly feminist perspective to the mix. The transition from *Le Désert mauve* (1987) to *Baroque d’aube* (1995) shows the previously mentioned changes but her feminist agenda places greater emphasis on the effect language and silence have on our experience of ‘reality.’ The view of silence and language offered by *Obasan* (1981) is coloured by Joy Kogawa’s Asian heritage. *The Rain Ascends*, on the other hand, reinforces the view that enforced silence can only be seen as negative. In all of these novels, the return to a more coherent storyline is accompanied by a heightened awareness of the act of writing and its consequences.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Résumé ........................................................................................................................... i

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... vii

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ viii

Table of contents .......................................................................................................... ix

I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

II. Jacques Poulin: Books and Cats Must Wander ......................................................... 29
    i. Volkswagen Blues ..................................................................................................... 33
    ii. Volkswagen Blues to Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini ............................................. 48

III. Michael Ondaatje: The Possibilities in Silence ...................................................... 60
    i. Coming Through Slaughter .................................................................................... 63
    ii. The English Patient ............................................................................................... 83

IV. Nicole Brossard: Our Last Chance at Silence .......................................................... 106
    i. Le Désert mauve .................................................................................................... 111
    ii. Baroque d’aube ..................................................................................................... 128

V. Joy Kogawa: The Burden of Untold Stories .............................................................. 152
    i. Obasan .................................................................................................................... 156
    ii. The Rain Ascends ............................................................................................... 175

VI. Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 192

VII. Bibliography ........................................................................................................... 201
Man is at a crossroads:

He must decide whether to resurrect his God out of a need to hold on to and to define himself by something "higher" (than himself), or he can move on into the unthought, and accept the responsibility for the course of his own life. For the first time in history, he is faced with a universe that does not disclose its secrets to him; its unresponsiveness, its silence, he calls: the abyss, the absurd, nothingness.

-Steven Bindeman

Put your hand through this window.

Michael Ondaatje
Introduction

What I loved Webb were the possibilities
in his silence.

-Michael Ondaatje

Buddy Bolden’s explanation, quoted above, in *Coming Through Slaughter*, of his friendship with the deformed photographer, Bellocq, points to an underlying tension evident in a good deal of postmodern literature—a tension between silence and language/speech. A renewed interest in the possibilities of language has brought about a renewed interest in the possibilities of silence. This appears to be a tension that will be with us for a while despite the fact that many of the more recent novels by postmodern authors clearly show the “high noon” of postmodernism to be over. The shift from early to later versions of postmodern novels that began in the late 1980s has decidedly continued. While a great deal of work was done on describing and defining the phenomenon of postmodernism in its earlier stages, considerably less has been done to describe the later stages. Like a good deal of the literature itself, the criticism seems to have moved into other fields.

Among those usually considered to be postmodern writers, there is, not surprisingly, an evolution between early and later works. While this is undoubtedly true of all authors whose work covers any length of time, my interest here is in what it means to postmodernism. For instance, Audrey Thomas’ *Blown Figures* is often seen as a
prototype of the Canadian postmodern novel. The distance between Blown Figures (1974) and Coming Down From Wa (1995) is considerable in terms of both time and style. The style of Coming Down From Wa displays many of the literary tendencies that have been ascribed to postmodernism—most notably, a concern with and questioning of the possibility of a "true story." There is, however, a marked absence of the radical style—the broken story line, the addition of advertisements, newspaper articles, bits of folklore—that distinguished Blown Figures. Another example of a radical change from early to later novels is found in Robert Kroetch's Gone Indian and The Puppeteers. To varying degrees, in the authors discussed here, the same shift can be seen between Michael Ondaatje's Coming Through Slaughter (1976) and The English Patient (1993) and Jacques Poulin's Volkswagen Blues (1984) and Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini (2002). The "fragmentation" and "discontinuity" that critics like Linda Hutcheon and Janet Paterson have seen as markers of postmodernism are not as pronounced in the later works of many authors. The movement, which has been accused by Marxist critics such as Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton of perpetually challenging without looking for solutions, is beginning to posit answers.

The most obvious change in the work of such postmodern writers is the fact that narrative—the story—has reasserted itself. In the early stages of the movement "fragmentation" and "discontinuity" were a point in themselves, a technique used to highlight the fact that a story is being created. But once the point has been made, the importance of actually telling the story resurfaces. This particular change is most highly visible in the more radical work of writers like
Kroetsch and Thomas. However, the initial observation of the resurgence of the coherent story line in the work of postmodern writers leads to other questions. Most notably, what postmodern aspects have been retained that allow the story to resurface without simply returning to a pre-postmodern style? The novels chosen to be examined here illustrate well these aspects.

Among the enduring features of postmodernism is a preoccupation with the “mark on the wall.” In an impulse perhaps as old as mankind itself, there exists an overpowering, very human desire to leave one’s mark on the world—the proof of one’s existence, be it individually or collectively. In postmodern works the impulse manifests itself in various ways, from accidental to conscious—from the wagon wheels of the pioneers leaving ruts in the ground on the Oregon Trail in Volkswagen Blues to the primitive drawings on the cave wall in The English Patient. Paradoxically, the mark on the wall is, at least in these cases, engulfed in silence.

In this vein, another thing that appears to be an important lasting legacy of postmodernism is a fear of, and fascination with, silence. This no doubt owes a large debt to post-structuralism as defined by Jacques Derrida, for one, as well as the postmodern questioning of the meta-narrative as defined by Jean-François Lyotard. Derrida has done extensive work exploring the ambiguous nature of language at its most basic level. Lyotard, on the other hand, has examined the ambiguity of texts that humanity has considered authoritative. If these theories are taken as reasonable then all forms of communication must be regarded as suspect. The only choice
the author is left with is dealing with communication that has proven faulty, or falling into silence.

It must be noted that silence in earlier works is often seen as a powerfully seductive, if dangerous, alternative. While positive aspects of silence are left an open possibility, the chief attraction seems to be that of the absolute. The temptation is to abandon the effort required by communication in favour of absolute silence. To deliver oneself to this sort of "peace" requires a sort of surrender. Many of the protagonists and some of the more minor characters of the first wave of postmodern novels literally disappeared into silence: in Thomas’ Blown Figures, Kroetch’s Gone Indian, Ondaatje’s Coming Through Slaughter, Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues and, to some extent, Nicole Brossard’s Le Désert mauve. In all these works the struggle for a voice is carefully balanced against the danger, and attraction, of silence.

The search for this balance is apparent in the self-ironic narrative voice that Linda Hutcheon has identified as a characteristic of postmodernism. Although an ironic voice is not new, the technique was often taken to extremes in early postmodern works. What seems to endure in later works is a certain amount of self-awareness that leads first to an admission of the possibility of fallibility and, therefore, to an allowance for the stories of others. This both arises from and contributes to the postmodern suspicion of universalizing trends—the tendency to reduce things to one story. It would seem that notions of silence as an absolute are accompanied by fragmentation and discontinuity in narrative and voice. The silence of later works becomes less of a void into which things disappear and more of a place
where a variety of voices can be heard. Once silence is seen as a positive option, room is created for other voices. Also there is, in many of these works, a tendency to tell and retell a story until all aspects are revealed. In the first telling the balance between silence and speech is weighted on the side of silence. With each telling the balance shifts a little until finally a version of the whole story is told. This technique serves to underline authorial awareness of both the possibility of multiple versions and the necessity for balance.

Postmodernism has from the outset been extensively defined. Since an examination of only certain aspects and not a redefinition is my intention, I will adopt, as a starting point, a specific definition. Therefore, my underlying critical assumption will be based, for the most part, on Linda Hutcheon’s theories of the postmodern. In particular her comments on the self-reflexive narrative voice and intertextuality will be taken into account. Because it is Canadian literature under study, her identification of a specifically Canadian postmodernism is useful. At the same time, Janet Paterson’s discussion of the unique approach of Québec writers to postmodernism will be of value, especially with respect to the debt of feminist writers to post-structuralism.

In the introduction to The Canadian Postmodern Linda Hutcheon outlines the major characteristics that she sees as belonging to a distinctly Canadian postmodernism. Most important to her definition is self-reflexivity: art that is aware it is art or, in Hutcheon’s words, “literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as a part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present” (1). Since the validity of
the entire notion that narratives have any direct relationship to the
"facts" or the "truth" is in question, it is not possible to challenge
one narrative by simply positing a new one. Self-reflexivity is often
most easily seen through the high visibility of the postmodern
narrator. Multiple narrators are sometimes used to the same effect.
There is little attempt to create the illusion that this story is an
accurate account of the facts, which is often the effect of an
omniscient narrator.

The parody and intertextuality that Hutcheon claims earmark a
postmodern work can be seen as another aspect of self-reflexiveness.
The use of parody and intertextuality in a novel that has, by its very
nature, already declared itself a version of a story tends to extend
the same claim to the existing works mentioned or alluded to. The same
is true of the historiography that she sees as typical of the Canadian
postmodern. Hutcheon says, "No longer is history to be accepted as
'how things actually happened', with the historian in the role of
recorder" (The Canadian Postmodern 15). The authority of history texts
is as open to question as anything else.

It should be mentioned here that the field of postmodernism is no
more homogeneous than the societies that produce the various forms of
it. The definition changes from one writer to the next and even more
from one culture to the next. Hutcheon, as previously mentioned, is
describing (in The Canadian Postmodern) a specifically Canadian brand
of postmodernism, English Canadian at that. She differentiates between
the more ideological Canadian postmodernism and the highly formalist
American surfiction. Raymond Federman, for instance, believes that new
forms of writing should no longer be fettered by the conventions of
writing from left to write or top of the page to the bottom. He also
states that "the very concept of syntax must be transformed" (9). This
last statement is not too different from one that might be made by
Nicole Brossard. However, while her challenge to conventional language
is an effort to create space for the experience of women, his is "an
endless interrogation of what [the text] is doing while doing it, and
endless denunciation of its fraudulence" (10). Hers is a means to an
end; his is an end in itself.

Another difference between Canadian and American versions that
stands out is the view of ex-centricity. In a good deal of American
work this takes the form of the decentring of the individual subject,
which Frederic Jameson describes as "the end of the autonomous
bourgeois monad or ego or individual" (318). Federman takes the
decentring of the individual to extremes:

Made of fragments, disassociated fragments of himself, this
new fictitious creature will be irrational, irresponsible,
irrepressive, amoral and unconcerned with the real world,
but entirely committed to the fiction in which he finds
himself. (13)

This notion assumes that the individual is centred within himself.

Hutcheon’s take on ex-centricity, on the other hand, has a
decidedly Canadian bend. Her definition, in a much more collective
fashion, is derived from the conflict between the centre and the
margin:

[T]here is also a strong shared concern with the notion of
marginalization, with the state of what we could call ex-
centricity. In granting value to (what the centre calls)
the margin or the Other, the post-modern challenges any hegemonic force that presumes centrality, even as it acknowledges that it cannot privilege the margin without acknowledging the power of the centre. (qtd. in Adam and Tiffin 170)

Policies of multiculturalism have tended to reinforce this feeling, since they inhibit the formation of any strong central culture. Hutcheon says, "In fact, we might be said to have quite a firm suspicion of centralizing tendencies, be they national, political, of cultural" (The Canadian Postmodern 3).

Janet Paterson explains in detail the Québécois version of postmodernism. She begins Moments postmodernes dans le roman québécois by saying:

le postmoderne désigne un savoir hétérogène qui remet en question tant les grands discours philosophiques, historiques et scientifiques que les systèmes de pensée annexés aux notions de consensus de vérité logocentrique.

(1)

Paterson, like Hutcheon, bases her definition on the work of Lyotard. Many of the characteristics she identifies as postmodern are similar to those identified by Hutcheon: heterogeneity, suspicion of metanarratives, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and the desire to challenge that which is considered normal, which she characterizes as "la rupture" (20). She says of postmodern texts, "Elles refusent, au contraire, d'admettre une seule vision et une seule autorité et elles subvertissent toute notion de contrôle, de domination et de vérité" (18). None of this is too different from Hutcheon's definition.
However, while Hutcheon concentrates on what these texts do, Paterson focuses on how they do it. Her emphasis is strongly on form. She, therefore, devotes a great deal of consideration to the function of narrative voice. Due to the attention to form, Hutcheon’s somewhat ideological concern with centre and margin is notably missing from Paterson’s definition. Intertextuality is also key to Paterson’s definition, as it is to André Lamontagne’s book on the work of Hubert Aquin. There is said to be “l’absence d’une tradition dite ‘moderne’” in Québec (2).

For this reason Québec’s approach to postmodernism has been somewhat different. Although many do identify a modern period in Québec, it began much later and shares a good deal of ground with postmodernism. Therefore, there is perhaps even more overlap among modernism, postmodernism and poststructuralism here than elsewhere. In the introduction to *Les Discours féminins dans la littérature postmoderne au Québec* the editors claim:

> Ce qu’on appelle de nos jours au Québec le postmodernisme a donc des liens particuliers avec ce qu’on appelait depuis la fin des années 1960 la modernité ou la nouvelle écriture. En même temps, ce postmodernisme uniquement québécois, né de la modernité, reste inséparable de la poésie formaliste des années 1970 et du mouvement féministe. (Koski, Kells, Forsyth 3-4)

Feminists—who have been in the forefront of *la nouvelle écriture* from its beginnings—have been quick to appropriate all three modes for their own use. They are often just as determined, however, to maintain a cautious distance from postmodernism at the same time:
Les différences incontournables entre les discours postmodernes et les discours féministes [. . .]. se manifestent dans le fait que les textes féministes attirent l'attention sur la transformation qui s'effectue quand le site de l'énonciation s'ouvre au féminin. Les discours postmodernes font semblant le plus souvent d'employer une voix fragmentée et neutre. (4)

A neutral voice, fragmented or otherwise, is unacceptable to those labouring to create a voice for a specific group.

However, there is no conformity among feminists. As Hutcheon points out, "[T]here are almost as many feminisms as there are feminists" (The Politics of Postmodernism 141). There are those, like Susan Suleiman, who see an exchange between postmodernism and feminism as mutually beneficial:

In short, feminism brings to postmodernism the political guarantee postmodernism needs to feel respectable as an avant-garde practice. Postmodernism, in turn, brings feminism into a kind of "high theoretical" discourse on the frontiers of culture, traditionally an exclusive male domain. (189)

Suleiman, rather than being worried over postmodernism's lack of a political agenda, feels feminism will provide one. Others are more careful in their endorsement of postmodernism. Patricia Waugh, for example, is highly conscious of the complicity involved in creating a "gendered identity which has been constructed through the very culture and ideological formations which feminism seeks to challenge and dismantle" (189). She, therefore, cautiously suggests:
It seems possible to me to draw on the aesthetics of Postmodernism as strategies for narrative disruption of traditional stories and construction of new identity scripts, without embracing its more extreme nihilistic or pragmatist implications. (190)

While she does not think feminism will provide postmodernism with any saving grace, she sees no reason to completely dismiss the useful aspects.

There are still others, like Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed in Les discours féminins dans la littérature postmoderne au Québec, who warn against the dangers of adopting postmodernism. Writers in search of a 'female voice' have nonetheless adopted techniques that can now be identified as postmodern. The work of Nicole Brossard is an example. However, doubt remains as to whether postmodernism can adopt a political agenda, feminist or otherwise. Hutcheon claims there can be no conflation of feminism and postmodernism for exactly this reason (The Politics of Postmodernism 168).

Another aspect of the debate over postmodernism is represented by Marxist critics, Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson. Both accuse postmodernism of aiding in the fragmentation of society. Postmodernism's sin is that it merely registers the process rather than trying to remedy it. Eagleton, like Jameson, speaks of the demise of the unified subject and how "technology and consumerism [have] scattered our bodies to the winds as so many bits and pieces of reified technique, appetite, mechanical operation or reflex of desire" ("Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism" 69). He asks whether or not "the bourgeois humanist conception of the subject as free, active,
autonomous, and self-identical is a workable or appropriate ideology for late capitalist society" (69). His answer is both yes and no: yes because only that sort of free-floating agent could survive in a late capitalist society and no because such a society has always been too self-contradictory to foster any real unity in the individual. It should be noted that he situates the notion of the unified subject inside ideology and not as a natural phenomenon. He just cannot decide whether to blame capitalist ideology for the destruction of the "bourgeois humanist subject" or for its creation in the first place. Jameson sees postmodernism as marked by "senses of the end of this or that (the end of ideology, art, or social class; the crisis of Leninism, social democracy, or the welfare state, etc., etc.)" (Jameson 312). This sort of view casts the movement into the realms of nihilism. Postmodernism adds to the ending of things rather than attempting to create something new from the rubble. This, nonetheless, does not seem to be his major complaint.

For Jameson the danger presented by postmodernism is that it is contained in the superstructure that it pretends to challenge. From a Marxist perspective, this has always been the fundamental lie of capitalism: the individual is free -- free to criticize the system, free to change it if he or she so desires. The logic that follows is that if a society does not change, it is because the members of that society do not wish to change it. Whether or not real change is possible never comes into question. The illusion of opposition works to prevent any real opposition.

Postmodernism’s penchant for challenging a society that it has no intention of breaking away from makes it a prime example of this line
of reasoning. As Hutcheon points out, postmodern literature does not work to move those in the margin to the centre. It simply allows them to speak from the sideline. The illusion created is that the margin is the best place to be. In the meantime, all those voices from the margin add to the splintering of society. This is seen as normal, though, since capitalism never had any “great collective project” and anything that gave the appearance of such was bound to fall by the way eventually (Jameson 320). However, despite all illusions, at the end of the day, there is no change in the economic power structure.

History is among the many concepts postmodernism stands accused of tearing apart by both Eagleton and Jameson. Jameson claims that “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (322). The postmodern questioning of the validity of any single text’s version of the truth leads Eagleton to decry “the death of truth itself” (680).

On the other hand, there are those who attack postmodernism not for what it does or does not do, but for failing to live up to its own claims. Glenn Deer takes exception to Hutcheon’s claim that the aim of postmodernism is “to trouble, to question, to make both problematic and provisional any such desire for order or truth through the powers of the human imagination” (The Canadian Postmodern 2). Deer answers that authors “do foster certain values, ways of seeing the world, or judgements concerning the way we should or should not live our lives” (7). He goes on to claim, “Experimental novelists cannot avoid constructing a stance towards their readers and promoting their concepts” (7). For Deer the postmodern claim of open-endedness hides an even greater tendency to authorial manipulation.
Sylvia Söderlind goes even farther to say that postmodernism is highly manipulative. She speaks of a critical establishment that, for the last several decades, has relegated the author to the margin. The manipulative strategies of those texts most easily labelled postmodern attest to the writer's desire for mastery in an age where he--again, I use the pronoun advisedly--has been reduced to an effect, rather than a cause, of reading. (231)

Postmodernism pretends to aim at greater reader involvement while in actuality it serves to move the author back to centre stage. In Söderlind's view much of postmodernism is an appropriation of the margin by the centre. Presumably, from this standpoint, the postmodern use of silence would also be regarded with suspicion.

* * * * *

The notion of examining silence through words seems in itself a bit of a paradox. However as John Preston points out in "The Silence of the Novel," there is also a paradox involved in thinking of a novel as a form of speech:

The text of a novel is a structure of silent discourse [. . .]. If it is speech it is not spoken; it exists, obviously, in silence on the printed page. The narrative of a novel operates at a point, the printed words of the text, where author and reader must collaborate yet be unknown, invisible to each other. (257)
Having taken both of these paradoxes into consideration, he, nonetheless, goes on to say, "The starting-point for an examination of silence in the novel may be the silence which is the subject of the novel" (257). Needless to say, literature which reveals a fascination with silence did not come into being with postmodernism. According to John Auchard:

There were quiet rumblings with Emerson and Carlyle, but the symbolists Mallarmé and Maeterlinck were the first seriously to attempt articulation, through silence, of beliefs and forces that had been lost to the nineteenth century. (9)

He views these "rumblings" as a "response to a loss of faith in language" and states that Henry James, about whom he is writing, "demonstrates no pre-eighteenth-century confidence in the sphere of language" (9).

It may well be that the rumblings were in place in the eighteenth century, but the loss of faith in language was by no means complete. As Henry Staten points out:

Despite all their expressed mistrust of the medium of words, philosophers have generally maintained a confident optimism in the possibility of purifying language, of finding its core of truth telling power. The aim has been subordination of language to the reality which that language is to describe. (20)

This retention of faith allowed Wittgenstein, in the early twentieth century, to devote himself to defining the limits of language, confident of a direct link between reality and language. Any perceived
obscurity was caused not by a fault in language but by a fault in usage: "[W]hat can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence" (Bartley 55).

Among the things Wittgenstein thought could not be expressed were abstract notions such as the spiritual or mystical. This comes close to the "mysterious centres of thought or consciousness" that the symbolists attempted to approach "through the explorations of reticence and the unspoken" (Auchard 11). The preoccupation with "le néant" and "l'inexprimé"--the inexpressible--echoes Wittgenstein’s attention to what can and what cannot be said. This interest led to "the dramatic movement variously named the 'théâtre du silence,' 'théâtre d'attente,' and 'static theatre'" (12).

Jean-Paul Sartre was one of the first to recognise and understand the irony of a literature of silence in the post World War I period. His comments about symbolist and modernist interests in silence are helpful here: "[C]e gout du mutisme la [the literature of silence] ramène au badinage. On peut bavarder en cinq mots comme en cent lignes" (qtd. in Auchard 8). While Sartre is obviously not convinced of the value of this approach, he points to one of its basic principles. Silence is seen as an alternative to cant or excessive chatter. It is considered to be one way of correcting the misuse of language. Although his work appears somewhat later, George Steiner also subscribes to this notion. In Language and Silence he asks if authors "are not writing too much, whether the deluge of print in which we seek our deafened way is not itself a subversion of meaning" (53).
Wittgenstein, in his later work, sought to disprove his own theory. He came to believe that there is no direct connection between the word and the thing it describes. During roughly the same period of time, some critiques of silence began to warn of its dangers. In this vein, silence is defined as a breakdown of communication. Albert Camus declares "silence between men" the root of unspeakable evil (284). It is important to note that Camus still thought "plain language so as not to increase the universal falsehood" to be a possibility.

The temptation, at this point, is to attempt to draw a direct line between Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida. There are, however, enough differences in their thinking to keep the connection from being an easy one. As Staten claims:

Wittgenstein may have succeeded in freeing himself from most of the philosophical urges he inherited, but he remained trapped by the urge to final liberation, which may be the original philosophical urge. Derrida emphasizes the impossibility of a simple exit from the inherited web of language, which we can escape no more than we can escape history or culture or our parentage. (3)

While Wittgenstein may mark the beginning of a change in thought, it is Derrida who has fully articulated that change. With Derrida any ambiguity in language can no longer be blamed on faulty usage; it is an inherent quality of language itself. At about the same point silence changes from being a correction for the abuse of language to a response to the failure of language.

As faith in the possibility of perfecting language diminishes, the possibility of falling into silence becomes a greater threat and
temptation. Susan Sontag claims, “As the prestige of language falls, that of silence rises” (21). In *The Aesthetics of Silence* she works through the many types and uses of silence called for by contemporary artists. In her conclusion she narrows silence down to two main styles, both of which are “apocalyptic” (32-33). The point at which silence becomes fascinating as an absolute—an alternative that admits no compromise—is where postmodernism steps into the fray. If the solid ground on which language was built could be shown to be shaky, it is natural to wonder what other solid grounds—such as the authoritative texts created with that language—might be shaken up. And it is natural to wonder which aspects, positive or negative, of silence may have been overlooked.

At this point it is important not to overlook the role language plays in this discussion. Whether language and silence are opposed to or complimentary to each other, they are intricately connected. Since I use both terms language and speech, I will define briefly what is intended by each. Language can refer to any form of human communication and is somewhat theoretical in nature. Speech is the act of using a specific language. It is possible to have language without speech, but it is not possible to have speech without language. The terms are to some degree comparable to Ferdinand de Saussure’s definitions of *langue* and *parole*. The distinction between the two terms is made necessary by the extremely different treatments given to communication by Nicole Brossard and Joy Kogawa. Brossard’s interest is in theories of language while Kogawa examines the act of speaking or failing to speak.
Writing in 1995, Simon Sibelman begins his discussion in Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel by distinguishing between the older 'negative' views of silence and newer 'positive' ones. While he acknowledges the long and varied history of the relationship between language and silence, his view of the negative aspects of both is unavoidably influenced by the Holocaust:

Thus, with reference to silence as response to the Holocaust, several important issues have been raised. First, the unique nature of the univers concentrationnaire would apparently place it beyond the pale of human language. Language, which has already been demonstrated as possessing numerous limitations, has few reserves to describe the events of the "Kingdom of Night." This impotence in language likewise leads to the imposition of a void of negative silence. (24)

His work is, nonetheless, an effort to extract the more positive literary uses of silence: "My analysis will strive to prove that silence, far from being negative, represents a positive phenomenon with a myriad of applications" (10). Despite the very specific nature of his usage, his description of what are, to him, the important aspects of the matter coincides with several of the aspects that I wish to examine.

I have identified six forms of silence that are of great importance to the novels under study: absolute silence, personal silence, enforced silence, deep silence, silence of secrecy, and silence of absence. I have adapted for my own use terms borrowed from Sibelman, Joanne Cockelreas, and Bernard Dauenhaur. Some terms are my
own but are informed by the work of these writers. These are briefly
delineated in the following paragraphs.

To begin with, it should be noted that the form of silence
Sibelman sees as nihilistic has affinities with the absolute silence I
see as characteristic of early forms of postmodernism. For example, as
expressed in the above quotation, he sees a link between the loss of
faith in language and the fascination with silence. He goes on to say,
"I use the term mutism to signify that state in which a speaker or a
writer, for whatever reason, retreats from l'énonciation into that
realm of absolute silence" (15). In postmodern novels it is this
notion of retreat or surrender that is both seductive and threatening.
Whether or not this retreat into mutism is voluntary, in most cases,
once the move is made, it is irreversible. I will use the term
absolute silence to avoid confusion with a voluntary form of mutism
which I call personal silence.

Personal silence is perhaps best described by Joanne Cockelreas
in "Within the Psychic Bubble: The Rhetoric of Silence in Modern
Fiction." She explains:

The psychic bubble consists of that airy embryonic shield
that is circumscribed by approximately an arm’s length from
the body. It is the cocoon of human metamorphosis [. . .].
That space still remains protective, silent, and a
sanctuary for the self. (14-15)

The following example elaborates her theory:

In the English-speaking world an invisible and protective
wall of privacy surrounds a small group the moment its
members begin to converse, and to approach, to "break in," creates apprehension for the "outsider." (17)

To adapt the notion slightly for my purposes, personal silence is, as suggested, a protective cocoon that each individual carries with him or her. Unlike absolute silence, it can be entered and exited at will and can be a place of either refuge or resistance.

Enforced silence has a negative effect on any person or group that has been denied a voice, usually by a person or group that is at least perceived to have greater power. Often the result is having no authentic voice with which to speak. Silence can be imposed in a number of ways: A person can be, for whatever reason, afraid to speak, the means of communication can be removed (either physically or psychologically, as in patriarchal language), or the potential listener may refuse to hear. Both the problem and possible solutions have long been the concern of feminist and ethnic writers. Their texts often revolve around their characters finding a way out of the silence and establishing a voice of their own.

Deep silence has similarities to the more benevolent "positive" silence that Sibelman finds evidence of in the works of Elie Wiesel. Silence swings from being the opposite of language to being the companion of language. The term deep silence is borrowed from Bernard Dauenhaur and is probably best explained by him. He refers to deep silence as "something which in principle lies beyond what human agents can achieve by their own endeavors" (19). It carries with it "the expectation that God will work within the space of silence the worshipers hold open" (19). Although he refers to Christianity in the preceding example, he goes on to add, "Thinkers from widely differing
traditions have pointed to it” (19). Buddhist meditation is an example. Deep silence can encompass any sort of silence which allows space for other things to develop. King-Kok Cheung’s notion of attentive silence as described in “Attentive Silence in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan” fits into this category.

A silence of secrecy is perhaps most obvious and most common among those with something to lose from speech. Speculation on reasons for this type of secrecy is not difficult: There could be loss of reputation; there could be monetary loss if an injustice is brought to light; or there could be a loss of liberty if a crime is involved. Also in this category is the secrecy of the story too terrible to be told. This is, of course, of special interest to readings of Holocaust literature:

The human psyche simply remains incapable of grasping the enormity of the reality of Auschwitz. [. . .] The poets of the First World War recognized how the public rejected their particular message; the survivors of the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki recognized the world would be unable to understand the frightening magnitude and reality of their disaster. (Sibelman 25)

This is unlike enforced silence in which the listener refuses to hear. The secrecy is caused by the teller knowing in advance that the listener will be unable to comprehend what he or she is being told. A secrecy brought about by a fear of alienating one’s audience plays an important role in the work of Joy Kogawa. With Kogawa the story too terrible to be told is supplemented with elements of the story nobody wants to tell or hear.
A silence of absence occurs when a character who is important to the story does not actually appear in the story. The presence of the character is evoked by the narrator. The physical absence, however, precludes speech. The silence of this character then becomes an intricate part of the narrative. A silence of absence plays a part in many of the novels I have examined—most notably Le Désert mauve, Volkswagen Blues and Obasan. Although it is difficult to imagine anything more absolute, death is, as a rule, included in this type of silence. The reason for this is that, in most cases, the actual death is unknown to or denied by the other characters. They proceed as though the missing character will eventually be heard from.

In addition to these six types, several stylistic ways in which silence can appear in a literary work are identified by Sibelman. Silence can take a physical or visual form in a text: blanks or white spaces. This technique, for instance, is used to great advantage in the poetry of many feminists, particularly in Québec. Nicole Brossard’s Le Sens apparent is a good example. Also the intentional inclusion of certain items at the expense of others serves to silence that which is left out. The author or narrator can choose to withhold information from both the characters and the reader, which is often the case in the novels of Jacques Poulin. The narrative technique of withholding information from the reader evident in the postmodern “fragmentation” and “discontinuity” of the early novels is another example. Each fragment is a piece of story on its own, and each piece is surrounded by silence. The connection between the pieces is fragile and gives the impression that the entire story could drop off into silence at any moment. This actually happens in many of the early
novels. On the other hand, the author can withhold information from only some characters. This is often accomplished through the internal monologue of a character or characters, as in *Obasan*. Setting, too, can create an atmosphere of silence. For example, the desert and the sea figure prominently in various texts.

And finally, a technique that is of particular interest to postmodernism is explained by Sibelman:

Narrative also seeks to maintain a balance between that which is said and that which is left unsaid, an effect often achieved through indirect discourse. Employing this technique, an author permits more than one narrative voice to be perceived. This multiplicity of voices establishes moments of uncertainty from which silence can emerge. (18)

From a postmodern point of view, a "multiplicity of voices" can have a second effect. It allows various sides of a story to be heard. He also speaks of a type of silence that echoes John Preston: the silence between the reader and the author brought about by the physical absence of the author from the text. In Preston's words:

The text is where the two [reader and writer] meet; yet in a sense the text is what tells them they cannot meet, being in effect what the author leaves for the reader to find after he has gone. The novel only 'speaks' in the absence of the writer, when the text is appropriated by the reader. (257)

Although these uses of silence are of lesser importance to my readings than the first six, they are, nonetheless, apparent in several novels and are, therefore, of interest for my discussion.
In terms of the novels actually under consideration here, in *Coming Through Slaughter* Michael Ondaatje does not make as blatant a use of postmodern techniques as do Kroetsch or Thomas, but the techniques are evident nonetheless. This is not, however, the most intriguing difference. The entire novels, *Gone Indian* and *Blown Figures*, are an attempt to track down the story only to have the protagonists disappear into an abyss of silence in the end. The protagonist’s flirtation with silence in *Coming Through Slaughter* is much more explicit. Buddy Bolden moves from being a gregarious storyteller to a complete mute. It is important to note that, unlike the other examples, Buddy Bolden’s story does not end with his retreat into silence. This suggests possibilities that are examined more closely in *The English Patient*.

Similarly, while the later novels of Kroetsch and Thomas deal implicitly with the return of the coherent story line, *The English Patient* deals explicitly with the possibility of telling stories and the possibility of the story existing side by side with silence. For instance, the English patient tells endless tales of himself while remaining silent about his identity. Forms of silence in this later novel are much more under the control of the characters. They are able to use deep silence to their own benefit. Narrative, in *The English Patient*, often takes the form of many retellings for each tale. The whole story emerges only gradually.

Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981) is an example of one of the marginal voices for which Hutcheon claims postmodernism makes room. This novel illustrates several types of silence. Foremost is the enforced silence that is also the concern of feminists. As previously mentioned, there
is a silence of absence in this novel. Co-existing with these is an attentive silence (a form of deep silence) that is indicative of inner strength or peace. In The Rain Ascends (1996) the author takes a more cynical view of silence. As often happens in cases of enforced silence what emerges in this novel is the extreme urgency of telling the story. The postmodern question of how a story can be told becomes "How can it not be told?" Despite a character’s desire for silence, at some point telling becomes a moral responsibility. As in The English Patient there is a tendency to retell a tale many times before the entire story is finally revealed.

Nicole Brossard has been an important figure in the nouvelle écriture in Québec since its beginnings. To the question of the truth-telling potential of language, she brings a distinctly feminist perspective. Le Désert mauve (1987) shows an extreme concern with women moving away from silence. Brossard is also more closely aligned with the formal aspects of language than the other authors studied here. This earlier novel (Le Désert mauve) explores the gap between experience and expression in which all communication becomes a form of translation. The novel also takes a serious look at the issue of the gap between author and reader which is bridged only by the text. In a fashion somewhat similar to The English Patient, Baroque d’aube (1995) is concerned with the process of creating stories. As with the later work of other postmodern writers, with Baroque d’aube Brossard seems to accept a more traditional storyline. Her acceptance, however, is nowhere nearly as wholehearted as it is with some other novelists. Her manner of writing remains highly stylized and cryptic. She has merely shifted her attention from the translation to the effects of the
translation. She also shifts her attention to the possibility of benevolent uses of silence.

Jacques Poulin is somewhat different from the other authors considered here in that, although the postmodern question of the possibility of "a true story" is present, the importance of stories in general never suffers for it. He may have thrown in some detours along the way, but he has never really abandoned the coherent storyline. Volkswagen Blues introduces all the pertinent elements of postmodernism: silence, intertextuality, multiple story versions, and the mark on the wall. From the beginning these have been important to Poulin's vision and he has developed them carefully over the course of his career. For instance, intertextuality and books in general have played an ever increasing role in his work. This interest in the reception of books causes him to give a good deal of attention to the silence between the author and the reader. Once it is freed of its author, a book becomes a being in its own right. Another dissimilarity from the other novels considered here is in the matter of absolute silence. Although Volkswagen Blues touches on the subject, Poulin gives far more attention to personal silence and silence of absence than he does to absolute silence.

As a final consideration here, I should point out that despite all efforts to keep the definitions of silence clear and separate, there is inevitably some overlap in types, especially from one novel to the next. For instance, in Kogawa's The Rain Ascends the lines between enforced silence and secrecy become unavoidably blurred. Then again, Asian interpretations of silence are much more detailed than Western ones. Deep silence generates a greater variety of meanings in
Obasan than in most of the other novels. And death, when treated as an abstract concept, is often seen as a form of absolute silence. For this reason my treatment of silence moves from thematic to narratological to ideological and, on occasion, philosophical. There is no equality among these types of treatments since they are largely determined by the novels themselves.
That Jacques Poulin writes quest novels is a bit of an obvious statement. What is less obvious is the exact nature of the quest. The plot of most of his novels is driven forward by a mystery character and the protagonist’s attempt to approach this character. Since the protagonist rarely achieves any sort of satisfactory understanding of the mystery character, the reader is left to wonder at the true motives of the search. There are many theories. Anne Marie Miraglia sees the intertextuality of Volkswagen Blues as proof of “quête du bonheur, la réalisation d’un rêve, la découverte d’une nouvelle frontière” and even more “quête d’identité” (121). Paul G. Socken, on the other hand, claims that Poulin’s preoccupation with the inner self is worked out in the context of fictions that narrate a quest for a world of perfection. That ideal world can best be perceived by the individual in pursuit of his own inner truth because the state of self-knowledge, in his fictional world, is one of harmony, tenderness, and peace--in other words, those qualities that are associated with the lost paradise. (11)

Antoine Sirois places the lost paradise theme against the mythological background of the androgyne. In his article "Espaces intimes et androgynie chez Jacques Poulin," he writes:

La séparation des sexes serait due au péché originel. Aristophane, dans Le Banquet de Platon, raconte la création d’êtres doubles, dont une portion est bisexuée, et ils ont
tous été séparés pour leur arrogance envers les dieux.

(184)

Sirois also points out the strange resemblance between Jim and Marika in Le Vieux Chagrin (184), an observation that can be extended to the characters of several other novels. At the risk of oversimplifying a complicated theory, the quest then becomes one for the other half of one’s own soul.

Although the search for self, or rest of self, is undeniable, in a decidedly postmodern vein, the quest also delves into the nature of man’s relationship with language and silence. By its very nature a quest involves silence—the silence of the mysterious object that is being sought. In Poulin’s novels the mystery usually involves a silence of absence or, at least, relative absence. Often the characters involved are close enough to be seen but still are not heard. In many ways related to the search for self is the problem of naming. Poulin’s characters, in the process of creating their own identities, also create their own names. To speak the name of a character is to evoke that character’s presence. To refuse a character a name is to deny him or her an identity and relegate him or her to silence.

Nonetheless all of Poulin’s protagonists are dedicated to words; they are writers of various types, librarians, translators, and booksellers. Despite any postmodern misgivings they may have about language—they are often disappointed with their own contributions—their dedication to words never wavers. In the world of Jacques Poulin the “mark on the wall”—the proof of a person’s existence—is of utmost importance. The “mark on the wall” serves to stride out against
absolute silence. It speaks out from the silence of human mortality. However, in most of Poulin’s work, it is important in a collective sense. The mark left by any individual is only one part of the whole. This, at least in part, explains the high degree of intertextuality in his novels. The more stories there are, the happier the characters are, and the silence is kept at bay. There is never any question of one version canceling out another. The lives of his characters are made rich by the abundance of words. A good portion of his fictional quests are a matter of seeking out and paying homage to the marks of others. A lesser portion are the effort to leave a mark of his own.

Part of Poulin’s mark that becomes more and more clear through the course of his work is his unique view of the activity of writing. A comment made by La Grande Sauterelle in Volkswagen Blues could well be attributed to Poulin himself. She says, “Un livre n’est jamais complet en lui-même; si on veut le comprendre, il faut le mettre en rapport avec d’autres livres” (169). The same can easily be said of Poulin’s work as a whole. Each novel should be considered an intricate part of an overall journey. For that reason his novels, with the exception of Volkswagen Blues, will be treated in a different manner than the other three authors considered here. While the focus with the other authors is on the changes between an early and a later novel, with Poulin there is no such drastic change. Instead there is the gradual evolution of specific themes. Although Volkswagen Blues is not Poulin’s first novel, its preoccupation with tracking down the story makes it a good starting point. Therefore, the second part of this chapter focuses on the evolution, in particular, of postmodern themes
and concerns beginning with Volkswagen Blues, and continuing through Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini.
Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* is representative of some of the best of early Québécois postmodern literature. As a quest novel, it sets out in search of answers that ultimately prove illusive. The novel brings up all the familiar questions about the relationship between language and silence and the possibility of telling or knowing “the true” story. Perhaps the most striking feature of *Volkswagen Blues* is its extreme intertextuality. As Anne Marie Miraglia notes, “*Volkswagen Blues* comprend plus de quarante intertextes évoqués sous la forme de chansons, tableaux, films, photos, livres historiques et, bien sûr, romans” (121). This is first and foremost a story about stories—about the telling, retelling and creating of stories. The quest—or mystery—story acts as a lynchpin for all the rest, and it introduces elements of silence to the text. There is, of course, a silence of absence, created by the protagonist’s missing brother. But there is also a good deal of personal silence which many of the main characters seem to carry with them. And in a less obvious way there are glimpses of deep silence and the absolute silence to which so many postmodern protagonists are drawn.

As with all of Poulin’s protagonists, Jack Waterman’s expectations for words are very high. He tells La Grande Sauterelle that he does not love his own books because “[i]ls ne changent pas le monde” (136). In response to her inquiry if he thinks that it is necessary to change the world, he replies, “Évidemment. Sinon, ça ne vaut pas la peine” (136). Nevertheless, he does bother. Despite feelings of inadequacy over his books, he continues to write. His
ongoing effort suggests that the world is changed by words but simply
in a different way than he expected. This suggestion is reinforced by
the enthusiasm--fuelled by a plethora of books--with which Jack and La
Grande Sauterelle set out to follow the Oregon Trail.

Poulin’s interest in the human desire to leave a mark is one of
the highest among postmodern writers. Jack and La Grande Sauterelle
are awestricken to find the ruts left in the earth by the passing of
the wagons so long ago:

L’homme et la fille marchaient côte à côte et presque en
silence. Quand ils avaient quelque chose à dire, ils
parlaient à voix basse. Comme dans une église, un
cimetière, un lieu sacré. (200)

Although they have been telling each other pioneer stories all along,
being in the presence of actual proof of the pioneer’s existence
leaves them both in awe. The marks in the ground speak for themselves.
It is interesting that the people whose trace they witness were just
"[d]u monde ordinaire," hoping to improve their lots in life, and not
at all the types of heroes whose stories Jack has been telling along
the way (133). This is as close as the two come in the novel to
sharing a moment of deep silence.

Some aspects of the situation are repeated when they arrive at
the rock called “le registre du désert” (212). Their first reaction to
the “mark on the wall” is to be thrilled by the evidence:

Ils trouvèrent aussi des inscriptions datant des années 40
et, parmi les noms de ces émigrants qui se dirigeaient vers
les terres fertiles de l’Oregon, ils reconnaissent, le cœur
battant, des hommes et des femmes qu’ils avaient appris à
The impulse has apparently not decreased with time. The rock has been fenced off to prevent any more tourists from adding their names. Despite the precautions, one of the names in bright red paint is Théo. Although there is no proof that it is their Théo, it seems probable that he, too, succumbed to the impulse.

Poulin's characters exhibit some of the most perfect examples of Joanne Cockelreas' "psychic bubble" or personal silence imaginable. Almost all of them wilfully surround themselves with a "cocoon" of "protective, silent" space (14-15). As with many of Poulin's protagonists, Jack Waterman is an introvert. He is not comfortable in his own skin: "[I]l se trouvait trop maigre et trop vieux, et trop renfermé" (47). Neither is La Grande Sauterelle completely at ease with herself. She feels "qu'elle n'était ni une Indienne ni une Blanche, qu'elle était quelque chose entre les deux et que, finalement, elle n'était rien du tout" (224). They are both more at ease with silence than with communicating with others. Because they all share similar qualities, La Grande Sauterelle and her black kitten make ideal travelling companions for Jack. When saying goodbye they both admit that they "aim[ent] mieux être [tout seuls]" (290). But their ability to respect each other's silences has allowed them to stay "ensemble tout l'été" (290).

Jack is more inclined than La Grande Sauterelle to use personal silence as a form of refuge—a place to hide. He has a tendency to fall into silence during times of uncertainty, as he does after discovering
his brother has been in trouble with the law in St. Louis. For three days La Grande Sauterelle is "incapable de lui arracher un mot" (142). So she goes about her business, keeps an eye on him and waits until he is ready to rejoin the speaking world. And again after they find Théo's name painted on the rock: "Comme chaque fois qu'une chose importante se produisait, Jack resta muet. Il ne retrouva la parole que lorsqu'ils eurent regagné le Volks dans le parking" (214). Jack himself refers to the process as "Le complexe du scaphandrier" (146). He explains,

[C]'est... un état pathologique dans lequel on se renferme quand on est en présence de difficultés qui paraissent insurmontables. [. . .] On sent qu'il est absolument nécessaire de se protéger, alors on s'enferme dans le scaphandre. (146)

Perhaps not surprisingly, he is only able to resurface when he has found the words—however implausible they may be—to comfort himself. For example, he reasons that Théo was such devout nationalist that he probably only tried to steal the old map so he could return it to its rightful place in Québec.

La Grande Sauterelle is also capable of using personal silence when it suits her. She tends to retreat when she does not want to be bothered. While preparing for the trip, Jack quickly learns that she is not one to waste words: "Elle n'avait pas dit si elle allait partir avec lui ou non. Elle ne parlait pas beaucoup" (41). When he asks, "[e]lle ne répondit pas. Quand c'était évident, elle ne répondait jamais" (45). She, however, is in far more control of this kind of silence than Jack. She is more inclined to use words to deal with
problems, as she does when she spots the Gatling gun at a museum: "WHAT THE HELL IS THAT?" (203). She occasionally goes for a solitary walk in order to regain self-control, but she always comes back to finish the story:

Au retour de sa promenade, la fille s’assit à la table en face de lui et il regarda son visage... Sur ce visage maigre, émouvant et beau, il vit passer une ombre fugitive.

Refermant son livre, il dit à la fille qu’elle pouvait y aller si elle avait encore quelque chose à raconter.

(207)

On the other hand, silence for La Grande Sauterelle often has the more constructive or creative nature associated with deep silence. In the same way that she has more control over her personal silence, she seems to have a more ready access to various types of deep silence. At a campground at Thousand Islands, she falls silent "à regarder le fleuve et les îles." She eats her supper

sans dire un mot et sans interrompre sa rêverie. Plus tard, elle ne sembla pas remarquer que la noirceur était arrivée, qu’il y avait des maringouins et que le temps devenait plus frais et humide. (54)

To avoid hurt feelings she explains to Jack that she has been dreaming: "'Les rêves sont comme des îles,' murmura-t-elle. 'Alors on est tout seul quand on rêve et ça ne peut pas être autrement" (55). Inside her silence entire stories have been revealed to her. Similarly, in her desire to "[s]e réconcilier avec elle-même," she spends a night alone beside the grave of a Mohawk warrior. She thinks somewhere during the night the chief will "l’aider à se connaître
elle-même" (82). Unlike Jack’s more or less involuntary retreat into silence, this is definitely a conscious, if somewhat optimistic, use of deep silence in order to open a space in which a new understanding can come to light.

Jack has an awareness of deep silence. He seems to experience it when he loses three hours of time in front of a painting that Théo is known to have liked in a museum (105-07) and in the already mentioned moments on the Oregon Trail. He understands La Grande Sauterelle’s need for it, both at the campground and at the cemetery. He also gives a lengthy description of what he considers to be “l’écrivain idéal” (41-51). The ideal writer loses himself in a silence (presumably deep silence) in which “[l]es mots et les phrases arrivent facilement et la source paraît inépuisable” (49). This, however, is not how writing happens for Jack; for him the act is painstakingly conscious. For the most part, deep silence eludes him. He senses it in old men staring out at the water, but his reaction is to break the silence by speaking to them: "[C]haque fois que je vois un vieil homme au bord d’une rivière ou d’un fleuve, il faut que j’aile lui parler—c’est plus fort que moi" (118).

The silence that propels the story is, of course, that of Jack’s brother, Théo. A silence of absence is a common motif in early postmodern novels. The action of the novel then revolves around the efforts to resolve the silence—to fill in the blanks, so to speak. These efforts align this type of silence with earlier definitions such as Sontag’s and Steiner’s in which silence is something to be overcome. As Jack explains, "Il y a des jours où vous avez l’impression que tout s’écroule... en vous et autour de vous [...].

38
Alors vous vous demandez à quoi vous allez pouvoir vous raccrocher" (14). He is acting on an impulse to straighten things out. There is still a belief that language will provide understanding that will cure the silence. Théo has been physically gone for fifteen to twenty years. His silence becomes complete a few years later with the arrival of his last letter in the form of a cryptic postcard.

The difference of the postmodern novel from previous forms of mysteries is the inevitable inability to answer the questions. Subtly the perception of silence begins to change from simply an absence of language to something quite independent of language. The attempt of Jack and La Grande Sauterelle to piece together Théo’s story is echoed by their attempt to piece together the stories of the pioneers who made the journey before them. These efforts are made even more difficult by La Grande Sauterelle’s frequent addition of the stories of the Natives, whose stories do not always coincide with the accepted version of history. Some of Jack’s long-time heroes, like Étienne Brûlé, are shown to be somewhat less than heroic (76-77). Brûlé, for example, after years of a less than exemplary life among the Natives, manages to offend them beyond repair: "Ils ont perdu patience et ils l’ont mis à mort" (77). And so the perception of the authority of the narrative begins to change. The result is the possibility of multiple versions of each story.

This contributes greatly to explaining the high degree of intertextuality in Volkswagen Blues. The more than forty references cited by Miraglia are made more credible by Jack’s profession as a writer with "une passion démesurée pour les mots" (56). Early in their friendship he tells La Grande Sauterelle, "Tout ce que je sais, ou
presque, je l’ai appris dans les livres” (30). Despite the fact that they are following the trail of real people, almost all of their clues are textual. The printed message on the back of the postcard that sets the journey in motion turns out to be a photocopy from the original account of Jacque Cartier’s first voyage (18). The police record of Théo’s arrest in Toronto lists two books as being in his possession. One is On the Road by Jack Kerouac and the other is The Oregon Trail Revisited, which becomes their guide for the next leg of their search (74-75). And finally there is a clue in a newspaper article in Kansas City (139).

Even the old Volkswagen is included in their passion for words. Jack often “se mettait à parler au vieux Volks; il lui disait toutes sortes de choses comme, par exemple: ’Ça va, mon vieux?... Pas trop fatigué?... Voudrais-tu qu’on s’arrête un peu?’” (97). They behave as though they expect answer: “Il y eut un long moment de silence, puis la fille dit que le moteur du Volks tournait bien” (98). The van even has a story of its own:

De vieilles factures, que Jack avait trouvées dans le coffre à gants en faisant le ménage, révélaient que le Volks avait été acheté en Allemagne; il avait parcouru l’Europe et traversé l’Atlantique sur un cargo, ensuite il avait voyagé le long de la côte Est, depuis les Provinces Maritimes jusqu’au sud de la Floride. [. . .] Et on remarquait ici et là, sur les murs ou à l’intérieur des portes d’armoire en contre-plaqués, toutes sortes de graffiti; une mystérieuse inscription en allemand, sous le
pare-soleil du conducteur, se lisait comme suit: Die
Sprache ist das Haus des Seins. (85)

La Grande Sauterelle has added her own message to the graffiti:
"[E]lle avait fix[é] avec du scotch tape sur le tableau de bord du
Volkswagen: UN MOT VAUT MILLE IMAGES" (169). The van leaves its own
mark wherever it has been parked: "il laissait sur le sol une fine
poussière de métal rouillé" (85).

La Grande Sauterelle also has an intimate relationship with
books. The narrator remarks, "Cette fille lisait avec une voracité
qu’il n’avait jamais vue. En deux jours, elle avait lu tout ce qu’il
avait écrit" (41). Accompanying her habit of devouring "tous les
livres qui lui tombaient sous la main" is a philosophy of books all
her own (42). She makes "une distinction entre les librairies et les
bibliothèques" (42). From money-hungry bookstores "elle volait les
livres sans aucun scrupule," but from libraries "elle les empruntait"
and mails them back later (42). Her explanation for her indiscriminate
reading fashion provides a good explanation of intertextuality in
general:

Il ne faut pas juger les livres un par un. Je veux dire: il
ne faut pas les voir comme des choses indépendantes. Un
livre n’est jamais complet en lui-même; si on veut le
comprendre, il faut le mettre en rapport avec d’autres
livres, non seulement avec les livres du même auteur, mais
aussi avec des livres écrits par d’autres personnes. Ce que
l’on croit être un livre n’est la plupart du temps qu’une
partie d’un autre livre plus vaste auquel plusieurs auteurs
ont collaboré sans le savoir. (169)
This, at least in part, responds to Jack's worry that his books do not bring about change. It is not an individual book but books in general that change the world. Jack and La Grande Sauterelle both take active part in increasing the living network of stories. They entertain, console and comfort each other from the Gaspé to California with stories they have heard, read or invented.

An awareness of the manner in which stories are created and how they are attached to reality is a great concern in the postmodern novel. Jack and La Grande Sauterelle bring the process into the open by the way in which they both recount old stories and add to them. Not only are they aware of their actions, they indulge themselves wholeheartedly. This is quite evident in their reading of their guide book:

Tous les renseignements dont ils avaient besoin se trouvaient dans The Oregon Trail Revisited. Ce livre non seulement leur disait où passait la vieille piste et comment s'y rendre, mais en plus il leur fournissait des données sur chacun des sites historiques et il rapportait même quelques passages des journaux que les émigrants avaient rédigés au cours du voyage. (163)

Their attachment to the book quickly becomes more intimate. The stories they recount soon change from past to present tense and from third person to first person narration (167, 177). At about the same time Jack's brother, Théo, becomes a guide to the pioneers, and the wagon master takes on a familiar aspect--"sa tête est pleine de brume"--a term Jack has used to describe his own condition. The wagon ruts at the top of Windlass Hill and the cemetery on the slope serve
to re-separate their stories from those of the pioneers: "Ils restèrent muets. Ils avaient le sentiment d'être indiscrets. Déplacés" (184).

Jack's stories of his brother receive the same imaginative treatment as those of the pioneers. The first memories of Théo's adventures that Jack shares with La Grande Sauterelle make it quite obvious that he views his big brother as a hero of sorts (34-35). He admits,

"Mon frère Théo, je ne l'ai pas vu depuis une vingtaine d'années, alors il est à moitié vrai et à moitié inventé. Et s'il y avait une autre moitié..."

Il eut un petit rire nerveux.

"La troisième moitié serait moi-même, c'est-à-dire la partie de moi-même qui a oublié de vivre." (137).

As the journey progresses, he continues to tell stories upon stories until he realizes

tout cela ne tenait pas le coup, alors il en rajoutait [. . .] et peu à peu la silhouette de son frère grandissait et prenait place dans une galerie imaginaire où se trouvait une étrange collection de personnages, parmi lesquels on pouvait reconnaître Maurice Richard, Ernest Hemingway, Jim Clark, Louis Riel, Burt Lancaster, Kit Carson, La Vérendrye, Vincent Van Gogh, Davy Crockett. (217)

He has unwittingly filled in the many silent spaces left by Théo's long absence. So complete is the creation of his brother that Jack wonders, "Peut-être que j'aimais seulement l'image que je m'étais faite de lui" (289). A more humorous version of the same idea is found
in the old hitchhiker they pick up who has reinvented his own life. Jack says,

*Il se prend pour Hemingway [..]. Il dit qu'il a vécu à Paris, rue du Cardinal-Lemoine... il parle de Cuba et de Key West, et il dit qu'il avait une maison à Ketchum, en Idaho... C'est la vie d'Ernest Hemingway!* (237).

The creation of identity in *Volkswagen Blues* is closely connected with naming or failing to name. Jack is a nickname chosen by Théo: “Quand on était petits, on se donnait des noms anglais et on trouvait que ça faisait beaucoup mieux!” (14). And Waterman is a pseudonym: “Il avait un jour demandé à son frère de lui suggérer un nom de plume” (42). We do not ever learn the name his mother gave him, although the connection of Jack to the author's name is difficult to miss. Similarly, La Grande Sauterelle is known usually by that nickname and occasionally by her Montagnais name, Pitsémíne. Although the first voice heard in the novel is that of La Grande Sauterelle's cat, (“Il fut réveillé par le miaulement d'un chat”) (9) its habitual silence is accentuated by the fact that he remains nameless for more than half the novel. Chop Suey does not receive his name, a name that he more or less earns for himself, until a chapter entitled “Le Milieu de l'Amérique.”

Moments of crisis are predicated on an absence of names. For example, La Grande Sauterelle says her overnight search for identity in the cemetery was ruined, at least partially, because “il y a eu cette histoire de la femme de Thayendanegea qui... je veux dire, elle n'a pas de nom et j'ai passé un partie de la soirée à me demander pourquoi” (87). She is denied and identity and, therefore, rendered
silent. The anonymity of the old chief’s wife causes La Grande Sauterelle to doubt his ability to pass on wisdom in matters of identity. Again when they find a photograph of Théo, Jack is upset by the lack of identification:

"Une chose qui m’agace," dit-il, "c’est l’inscription au bas de la photo. Ils mentionnent le nom de tout le monde, mais lorsqu’ils arrivent à mon frère, tout ce qu’ils trouvent à dire c’est UNIDENTIFIED MAN. ‘Un homme sans identité’, c’est un peu comme s’ils disaient ‘un homme sans importance’, non?" (267)

As it turns out, Théo’s loss of identity is not confined to the photograph: “il ne savait plus très bien qui il était” (288). No longer able to create his own identity, he must remain Jack’s creation.

Although the silence of absence is initially seen as something intriguing to be figured out, the discovery of the object of the quest renders silence a story of its own--one that cannot be read. Finding Théo should have provided the answers to all their questions, but, in actuality, it only creates more. His retreat into absolute silence has left him incapable of explaining the postcard or any other aspect of his journey: "Les yeux de son frère étaient fixés sur lui et il y avait une sorte d’interrogation muette dans son regard, mais le reste du visage était dénué de toute expression" (284). For all intents and purposes, he has become a permanent part of the silence, and all that is left for Jack, the lover of words, is to accept the existence of that silence.

45
This is one of the novels in which death must be treated as a type of absolute silence rather than a silence of absence. In Volkswagen Blues this type of silence is never mistakenly considered to be temporary. It is viewed only in its absolute form. During the course of the trip, Jack is able to acknowledge his long-term fascination with the absolute silence of death. He finally understands why he is drawn to the old men he comes across who are standing and staring out at the water:

Ce que les vieux contemplent, quand ils rêvent au bord d'un cours d'eau, c'est leur propre mort; je suis maintenant assez vieux pour le savoir. Et moi, je m'approche d'eux parce qu'au fond de moi, il y a une ou deux questions que je voudrais leur poser. Des questions que je me pose depuis longtemps. Je voudrais qu'ils me disent ce qu'ils aperçoivent de l'autre côté et s'ils ont trouvé comment on fait pour traverser. (119)

This suggests that, unlike the search for his brother, absolute silence is at least part of the attraction for Jack. There are certain affinities, especially in this novel, between silence of absence and absolute silence. Although silence of absence is not necessarily a permanent condition, through the years Théo never breaks his silence. And by the time Jack and La Grande Sauterelle find him, it has become absolute.

If the nature of Jack's quest is indeed self-discovery, then what he has learned is the existence of a silence that cannot be fathomed but must be acknowledged. Despite his questioning, there is no evidence that the old men by the water have any clearer insight
into the matter than he does. They are simply more aware of its existence. Intrigued as Jack may be by absolute silence, he is just as threatened by it. Although he is worried that he agreed with "cette idée tellement vite," (289) when the staff at the home suggests Théo is better off there, Jack is quick to distance himself from him. Nonetheless, the fact that he is able to leave his brother where he finds him shows that he has achieved a certain amount of acceptance that some silences must remain silent.
Volkswagen Blues to Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini

As has already been demonstrated by Volkswagen Blues, Jacques Poulin’s approach to the possibility of “a true story” is somewhat different from many postmodern writers. He spends little time worrying over the loss of the notion of “the true story” and quickly posits a new ideal. It is not the story’s ability to accurately reflect the world that has failed to live up to expectations; it is the nature of stories that has been misunderstood. Therefore, he is not given to as much experimentation with narrative line as some. The inability to really know a story or a person is underlined by the frequent appearance of a mystery person—a character shrouded in silence. The unknown and unknowable person brings about the question of the creation of identity, either of self or of other. And the silence of the person generates speech.

The most intense relationships with silence in Poulin’s novels are brought about by questions of identity. Personal silence, caused by the protagonists lack of ease with the real world, continues to be the most visible type. The tentative attraction with forms of absolute silence found in Volkswagen Blues is as courageous as the flirtation ever becomes with Poulin. Through the course of later novels the attraction, recognised even in the earlier novel as threatening, turns to horror. And eventually the absolute silence of death, which his protagonists sometimes see as a solution, is also dismissed as unacceptable.

The disillusionment with the “true story” is best illustrated in Volkswagen Blues. Jack’s version of his hero, Étienne Brûlé, is set
straight by La Grande Sauterelle (75-77). And again after visiting the Buffalo Bill museum "Jack vit tout de suite que Buffalo Bill, comme les autres héros de son frère et comme son frère lui-même, allait essuyer une tempête" (170). By the time they reach San Francisco, he has come to expect her additions to his "truth." As they stare across the water at Alcatraz, he is reminded of Burt Lancaster in Les Oiseaux d’Alcatraz and, therefore, other of his brother’s favourite actors: "John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Alan Ladd, Randolph Scott, Kirk Douglas...Et vous, à quoi pensez-vous?" (257). She replies, "Aux Indiens. Ils se sont emparés de la prison en 1969 et ils ont déclaré que l’île était un territoire indien" (257). Jack’s love of a story makes him more than willing to welcome all new versions. From this point of view the impossibility of pinning down "the true story" is not cause for alarm; it is cause for celebration.

The inability to know the true story is, in many of Poulin’s novels, inextricably connected to the inability to really know another person. Again this is seen most clearly in Volkswagen Blues, in which his failure to uncover his brother’s story leads him to admit that he has created most of what he remembers of his brother’s character: "il est à moitié vrai, et à moitié inventé... La troisième moitié serait moi-même" (137). This theme recurs in Le Vieux Chagrin. Jim follows footprints in the sand—strangely the same size as his own—to a cave where he finds evidence that someone has been passing time (9-10). From the few items he finds there, including a copy of Mille et une Nuits with the name Marie K. written inside the cover, he builds a story and a woman. His obsession with both grows until he fancies himself in love.
As in *Volswagen Blues* naming is significant. It can be no accident that in all of Poulin's novels, the characters who are given traditional names are either Jim, Jack or some variation of Marie. In *Le Vieux Chagrin* Jim obviously feels that, since the woman is his creation, he is at liberty to rename her Marika. It should be noted that at this point in time he is also looking for a character for the new love story he is trying to write. Neither he nor the reader is granted enough first hand information to really even establish the existence of the mystery woman. Conversely, the urchin who worms her way into Jim's home and life and whose existence is beyond question is known only as "La Petite."

A similar situation occurs in *Chat sauvage*. Jack takes on a mysterious old man as a client and is soon consumed with a desire to know him and his story. In this case the existence of the old man seems quite probable to the reader; Jack is able to determine his address and occupation, and the name on his mailbox is Sam Miller. Nonetheless, he is never referred to as anything but "Le Vieux," underlining the mysterious aura of silence that surrounds him and somehow connects him to Jack. On several occasions an uncanny resemblance between the two is noted:

> Je sentis, alors, plus nettement que les autres fois, que des liens mystérieux et puissants m'attachaient à ce curieux vieillard. Des liens qui n'étaient pas du même ordre que les rapports professionnels. Des liens qui avaient quelque chose à voir avec mes parents décédés, avec l'âme voyageuse de mon frère et le pays incertain vers
lequel nous étions tous emportés depuis le commencement du monde. (154)

Whereas in the previous example the reader is almost invited to believe that Marika exists only in Jim’s mind, here we are almost allowed to believe that Le Vieux is an older version of Jack himself. The mystery person in *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini* does not play nearly as large a role. Gabrielle is seen only by Jack, whose mental stability is, at this point, in question. However, in none of these cases are we given any satisfaction. The mystery characters always retain their silence.

As noted earlier, it is this very silence that gives birth to the plenitude of words. The high degree of intertextuality that fills all of Poulin’s novels gradually develops into a philosophy of books. It begins in *Volkswagen Blues* with La Grande Sauterelle’s declaration that no book should be judged on its own but rather as a part of a collective (169). Her very liberal “borrowing” habits add another dimension to the philosophy. She takes books at will, but she mails back those taken from libraries, thereby not denying other people access to the book. If books are a part of a collective, they also belong to the collective.

The circulation of books among people becomes so important that the entire story of *La Tournée d’automne* revolves around the activity. The owner of the travelling library makes it a point “de ne jamais refuser un livre à quelqu’un” (55). His strategy for loaning books is quite unique:

[I]l ajouta qu’il n’y avait aucune fiche à remplir. Elle n’avait qu’à retourner le livre par la poste, à l’adresse
imprimée à l’intérieur de la couverture. Si elle en avait le goût, il lui était permis, et même conseillé, de prêter le livre à d’autres personnes. (58)

He reasons qu’un certain nombre de livres ne seraient jamais retournés à Québec, mais ce n’était pas grave: sans cesse les livres se promênaient, voyageaient et c’était ce qui pouvait leur arriver de mieux. (106)

This brings to mind Preston’s statement: “The novel only ‘speaks’ in the absence of the writer” (257). In a sense, once the author becomes a silent partner, novels take on lives of their own and part of their mission is to be read by as many as possible. After all, “les livres sont comme les chats, on ne peut pas toujours les garder” (123). The travelling librarian has networks of people who pass the books back and forth among themselves between his visits. In a disquieting way, as though his identity is less important than his function, he is known only as “le Chauffeur.”

Lesser versions of the same philosophy are found in Chat sauvage and Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini. Jack in Chat sauvage is a public writer; he pens for others that which they feel incapable of expressing for themselves. He, therefore, is as anonymous as “le Chauffeur” in some ways. He is even more of a silent partner than most authors since he does not even put his own name to his work. And he apparently feels no qualms about “borrowing” various phrases and passages from all his favourite writers, although he claims:

Bien entendu, j’avais légèrement modifié les phrases, autant pour les adapter au contexte que pour éviter les
He has simply made the notion of books belonging to the collective more personal. In *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini*, on the other hand, a much older Jack owns a bookstore. He leaves piles of books beside the door for easy stealing because “[l]es livres sont faits pour se promener” (31).

Although for the most part the abundance of books is cause for joy, there is a cost involved in dedicating oneself to words. As has been frequently noted, Poulin’s characters are usually marginal. As with Jack in *Volkswagen Blues*, they are well protected in their psychic bubbles of personal silence. Their commitment to the written word somehow compromises their ability with the spoken word: they are not usually comfortable with people. As Jack tries to explain to La Grande Sauterelle:

Premièrement, à l’âge où les gens commencent à vivre pour vrai, je me suis mis à écrire et j’ai toujours continué et, pendant ce temps, la vie a continué elle aussi. Il y a des gens qui disent que l’écriture est une façon de vivre; moi, je pense que c’est aussi une façon de ne pas vivre. Je veux dire: vous vous enfermez dans un livre, dans une histoire, et vous ne faites pas très attention à ce qui se passe autour de vous et un beau jour la personne que vous aimez le plus au monde s’en va avec quelqu’un dont vous n’avez même pas entendu parler. (136)

There is a repetition of the first part of this sentiment in *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini* when a reporter asks Jack, “Est-ce que les mots
construisent un mur autour de vous? Est-ce qu’ils vous enferment dans une tour?” (56). Jack tells him that he is not asking the right question: “La bonne question, c’est de savoir si on choisit la vie ou la représentation de la vie...La représentation de la vie est mille fois plus intéressante” (56). He, at least, does not regret having alienated himself from the real world. The last part of the first passage, however, deals with a more painful sentiment—that of alienating the people closest to him. This is echoed in La Tournée d’automne. Jack, the writer, has a secondary role in this novel and an apparently much loved wife whom he is constantly misplacing:

L’écriture tenait une telle place dans sa vie que certains aspects de la réalité lui échappaient. Ainsi, lorsque sa femme partait en voyage, il ne s’en rendait pas compte tout de suite. Pour le prévenir, elle lui laissait pourtant des notes un peu partout. (24)

He is aware, though, that his obsession with words causes him to retreat too often into personal silence and places the marriage under stress and perhaps even in danger. The mere mention of his wife’s name alarms him:

Il se leva en repoussant sa chaise. Chaque fois qu’on prononçait le nom de sa femme devant lui, il devenait subitement inquiet. Il alla au fond de la salle pour téléphoner, puis il revint en souriant. (112)

This is an excellent example of how speaking the name of an absent character can evoke the presence of that character. Jack had forgotten about the existence of his wife until she was called out of the silence.
Then there is, as already mentioned, "le Chauffeur" in La Tournée d'automne. Even though he is not a writer himself, he is literally walled in by the books in his minibus. They are part of his existence to the point that his own identity is obscured. The problem of too many words hampering real life is represented symbolically in Volkswagen Blues when Jack and La Grande Sauterelle arrive at the Rockies, and Jack worries that the van is overloaded: "On a trop de livres, dit-il. C'est beaucoup trop lourd dans les côtes. J'aurais pas dû apporter mes gros dictionnaires" (209). In a rather paradoxical fashion, it would seem that the high level of personal silence maintained by Poulin's characters is the result of an overenthusiastic relationship with words.

Instances of deep silence are even more rare in the later novels than they are in Volkswagen Blues. "Le Chauffeur" in La Tournée d'automne is the character who probably comes closest to experiencing it:

Le Chauffeur regardait lui aussi le paysage. Il avait les yeux humides lorsque Marie revint s'asseoir à ses côtés...

"On dirait que certains paysages... font partie de nous-mêmes et qu'on ne peut pas s'en séparer, n'est-ce pas?"

Étonné de voir qu'elle avait deviné ce qui se passait en lui, il ne sut quoi répondre et ils gardèrent tous les deux le silence. (52)

This experience is very much of the same nature as Jack's encounters with deep silence in Volkswagen Blues. Although "le Chauffeur" has an awareness of it, his access to it seems more or less accidental.
Later, while they are staring at the stars, he admits to Marie that the feeling escapes him:

Je ne sens pas le lien, la filiation dont [Hubert Reeves] parle. Je veux dire, je n’ai pas le sentiment de faire partie d’un ensemble. En fait, je me sens complètement isolé, tout seul... (141)

While many protagonists of early postmodern novels find absolute silence at least as fascinating as frightening, for the most part Poulin’s protagonists are more haunted by it than attracted to it. In fact, in terms of absolute silence death rates slightly higher in the opinion of most characters than mutism. In Volkswagen Blues Jack is intrigued enough by the old men at the water’s edge to ask questions. However, on finding his brother has retreated into absolute silence, he quickly accepts the situation and turns away. This situation increases in subsequent novels.

In La Tournée d’automne, “le Chauffeur” tells Marie, “Devenir vieux, c’est une chose qui m’intéresse pas du tout. J’ai décidé depuis un bon moment que la tournée d’été serait la dernière. Vous comprenez?” Eerily evoking memories of the silence of the old men by the water in Volkswagen Blues, a while later he tells her he has seen his father: “Je le vois de plus en plus souvent. La plupart du temps, il me tourne le dos et contemple le fleuve” (167). No doubt the resolution of the problem is given away by the title of the book. He finally finds the courage to reach out to Marie: “J’ai décidé de faire la tournée d’automne et je veux seulement vous demander... si vous accepteriez de la faire avec moi” (207). It is not growing old that frightens “le Chauffeur”; it is growing old alone.
The case of the older version of Jack in *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini* is quite different. As a victim of “Eisenhower’s disease,” he has good reason to fear the passing of time. He is slowly sinking into the absolute silence that claimed Théo. For a person whose life has been words, to lose them all is far more horrifying than death. He tells Jimmy:

Le jour où je perdrai la raison, il ne faudra pas m’envoyer à l’Hôpital-Dieu et je ne veux pas non plus être à la charge de quelqu’un. Pour moi, ce sera le moment de partir. Seulement, je ne sais pas si je serai capable de le faire moi-même, j’aurai peut-être besoin... d’une petite poussée.

Alors, je veux savoir si tu accepterais... (58)

It is noteworthy that one of Poulin’s real-life heroes, Ernest Hemingway, faced with a similar decline in his ability to write, chose suicide. The plight of Jack is made even more poignant by a scene in a hospital waiting room. A little girl confides in Jack, “Le mien, mon pépé, on peut pas lui demander de raconter des histoires. [. . .] Il a oublié comment on fait” He has, sadly, also forgotten how to eat by himself (157-60). In a gesture that foreshadows what will be his own solution, Jack offers to tell the little girl a story but only if Jim will help.

Jack’s ultimate rejection of the “Hemingway solution” places the novel back on more optimistic grounds and, in some ways, leaves it as open-ended as the rest. When the dreaded moment arrives, Mistassini calls to tell Jim: “Il parle de la petite poussée...” (181). On arriving Jim is surprised that “il n’y avait aucun bruit” but horrified that the “Beretta se trouvait sur la table de chevet” (182).
As the crisis passes, Jack explains that although the physical impairments of growing old are bad enough,

[t]out ça, au fond, je pourrais l'accepter pendant un certain temps si j'étais en train d'écrire quelque chose; je veux dire, quelque chose d'important et d'original. Il me vient toutes sortes d'idées, mais elles me plaisent pas: elles ont un air de déjà vu. Si ça continue, je vais devenir un vieil écrivain. La maladie d'Eisenhower m'empêche d'avoir des idées nouvelles. (184-85)

He describes an old writer as one who "regarde seulement derrière lui" (185). Given that he cannot rejuvenate himself, he proposes a different idea:

Évidemment, si quelqu'un prenait ma place... Quelqu'un de plus jeune...[. . .]. Quelqu'un qui aurait appris le métier en faisant de la traduction et qui, par conséquent, aurait une écriture sobre et non pas cette tendance au lyrisme que je déteste... Quelqu'un qui aurait un peu voyagé pour se mettre du plomb dans la tête... (185)

He has been grooming Jim as a replacement from the beginning when Jim first admits hearing the voices among the stacks of books. Jack claims that the books converse among themselves, and only those with "a calling" can hear them (11). He counters Jim's hesitation and uncertainty with a promise to teach him all "les trucs utilisés par Hemingway" (186).

This is, of course, a solution completely in keeping with the philosophy of books that has been developing throughout the novels discussed. While the silencing of an individual voice may be tragic,
it is the collective that is of most importance. This is similar to the way that La Grande Sauterelle claims that books should not be judged individually but as a whole. Jack's own loss is more acceptable to him as long as he knows another voice will take up the torch, so to speak. Despite the toll taken on individuals by the passion for words, the result of all their efforts provides an added richness to the rest of the world. The body of Jacques Poulin's work provides an answer for the dilemma faced by Jack in *Volkswagen Blues*. When he worried that he could not love his books because they did not change the world, Jack was thinking as an individual. A book may not change the world, but books do.
Michael Ondaatje

The Possibilities in Silence

In the midst of an era bent on questioning the truth-telling potential of narrative, Michael Ondaatje is clear on his position. In a 1990 interview with Catherine Bush he says, “I think reclaiming untold stories is an essential role for the writer” (247). This single statement suggests many of the elements of the postmodern claim and the emerging response to it. For this reason Ondaatje’s work--his novels in particular--illustrates very well the move from early to late postmodernism.

The reference to “untold stories” is evidence that Ondaatje shares a postmodern mistrust of meta-narratives. For every “official” version of a story there are countless unofficial versions--countless untold stories. As the epigraph of In The Skin of a Lion, which quotes John Berger, claims, “Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one.” Ondaatje, however, does not subscribe to the theory that the questioning of the possibility of a “true” narrative renders all narrative invalid. He considers the writer’s job to be the “reclaiming” of “untold stories.”

In the same interview he goes on to say,

One of the things a novel can do is represent the unofficial story, give a personal, complicated version of things, as opposed to competing with the newspapers and giving an alternate but still simplified opinion [...]. I think a novel can become, in this way, a more permanent and political reflection of your time. (247)
Postmodern theories aside, Ondaatje has lost no faith in the power of literature.

All of this is apparent in his work. A recurring theme in his novels is the opposition between the possibility and the necessity of telling a story. With Ondaatje the possibility of telling a true story is threatened not so much by any inadequacy of language as by the existence of so many other stories. This makes the necessity even more urgent. Multiple narrative voices and the form itself point to the fact that no story can be told "as though it were the only one." And yet many of his characters are engaged in that very activity. Each one is attempting to understand and tell his own story.

One constant in Ondaatje's exploration of this theme is the "receiver". In each of his novels a main character acts as a "receiver" of stories--a keeper of the flame, so to speak. This character is a focal point; all the other stories in the novel flow through the "receiver". Coming Through Slaughter has Buddy Bolden, In The Skin of a Lion has Patrick, and The English Patient has Hana, who as a child was initiated as a "receiver" in In The Skin of a Lion. It is in the "receiver" that the most intense play between silence and communication can be seen. To a large extent the very identity of the "receiver" is formed by the stories to which he or she is recipient. The ability to accept his or her own identity and to cope with the world in general is a direct reflection of this character's ability to maintain a balance between the stories and silence. Silence allows the character the possibility of a space in which the character's own identity can unfold and a place of refuge from what can sometimes seem like an onslaught of stories. The "receiver" is usually walking
a tightrope. To lean too far in either direction would prove disastrous.

Ondaatje's earlier novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, displays many of the formal and thematic characteristics that Linda Hutcheon identifies as postmodern. There are multiple narrative voices, broken story line and narrator intervention—the occasional comment made directly to the reader. The fascination with silence has a decidedly dangerous aspect. Like many novels of its time, *Coming Through Slaughter* is a quest to solve a mystery—to identify the "true story." The point of much early postmodern literature is that this quest must ultimately end in failure. With *Coming Through Slaughter* the success and failure of the quest are both qualified.

On the other hand, Ondaatje's later novel, *The English Patient*, published nearly twenty years after *Coming Through Slaughter*, would seem to be a return to a more traditional form of storytelling. *The English Patient*, however, retains many of the concerns—and a few of the formal aspects—of the earlier novel. The question of whether or not the real story can be known remains. The relationship between language and silence is still the issue. However the possibility of balance between the two hinted at in *Coming Through Slaughter* is much stronger in *The English Patient*. Language and silence are no longer diametrically opposed to each other.
Coming Through Slaughter

Of all Ondaatje's "receivers" Buddy Bolden is undoubtedly the most extreme case. While the form of Coming Through Slaughter is highly postmodern, it also reflects the erratic activity of the mind of the main character. Bolden, in turn reflects the world around him—a fact that throws his own identity into jeopardy. Stories pass through Bolden, who is given to excess in all he does, at such a rate that he is eventually burned out by the process. Through the course of the novel, he swings from being a complete stranger to silence to being engulfed by it. In keeping with much early postmodern literature, silence represents the opposite of language, the tempting but dangerous alternative. Although for a short time he attempts to reconcile the two, in the end Bolden is destroyed by his inability to find some sort of balance.

From the beginning, Coming Through Slaughter has elicited a good deal of widely varied commentary, from Sam Solecki's claim that the novel is a condemnation of extremist art ("Making and Destroying") to Leslie Mundwiler's description of it as being in "the throes of modernism" (131). There are even valid and valiant attempts to read Bolden's end as positive (Rooke 268). Whatever the reading, there is little doubt that Coming Through Slaughter appeared at precisely the right moment to place it on the cutting edge of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon's statement that the novel is "told in fragments that force the reader to enact the processes of aesthetic ordering and imagining" places it firmly inside her own definition of the
postmodern (301). The form, ironically, forces the reader into an ordering process of which Bolden himself is incapable.

The technique of continuously changing time and narrators that causes the reader to organize the story is the same one Ondaatje used with great success in *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid*. *Coming Through Slaughter* opens in what is presumably the narrator’s time. Bolden is first mentioned in the past tense (10) but is actually introduced, in the present tense, in a short paragraph surrounded by the white silence of the rest of the page (11). A telling glimpse of the character has been plucked from a silent history. The next page continues the description in the more expected past tense. However, the tense of the narrative continues to shift at random throughout the novel.

This is also true of the novel’s narrative voice. Although a large part of the story is told in the first person, there is not just one narrator. Bolden, Crawley, Mumford and Pickett all tell parts of the story from their own individual perspectives. Interestingly, Webb does not. Webb falls into the first of two levels of third person narrator. Since he is the detective solving the mystery, it stands to reason that his part be told by a narrator with a limited point of view. There is, however, seemingly laid over the top of the entire story, another more, but not completely, omniscient narrator.

This is the self-aware, ironic postmodern narrator. By his very existence, he is constantly informing the reader that a story is being created. When Webb enters the story and is surprised to find Bolden has been missing for six months, this other narrator knows
“Bolden will take two more years before he cruises home” (21), something neither Webb nor the reader knows at this time. And “While Webb is talking to Crawley,” the narrator knows that “this is what Bolden sees” (31). He also admits to his own limitations, thereby denying the reader any firm ground on which to stand by throwing his own reliability into question. He speculates that Bolden spent the second morning after his return “(perhaps) with Pickett. Pickett should not have been that difficult to find” (117). He reasons that since Bellocq had been familiar with that part of town that “Bolden had probably been there before, with him” (117). And finally, the narrator intervenes directly in the story, questioning his empathy with the main character—“Why did my senses stop at you?”—and perhaps creating a link to Ondaatje himself (134).

One of the effects of this technique is that it gives the reader the impression that events happen simultaneously rather than chronologically. This is especially evident in the section already mentioned in which Bolden is seen moving through the shaving parlour (11) immediately after the narrator is seen moving through the streets of “[h]is geography” (8). This quick slide from one scene to another minimizes the passage of time and again draws the reader into conspiracy with the author; no doubt, any linear perception of time loses its importance to an author viewing the story as a whole. However, the form of the novel also acts as a mirror to the form of Bolden’s music and his stories. And all three leave ample space for one of Bolden’s chief concerns: “the possibilities in the middle of the story” (43).
Coming Through Slaughter’s postmodern parody of the detective novel has also attracted a good share of attention. As Nancy Bjerring points out,

The parody emerges when the postmodern antidetective, emulating the classical detective in his or her analyses of causes and crimes, typically encounters frustration, self-delusion, and self-reproach, but ends up proliferating rather than conquering such confusion. Whereas the classical detective “solves” the mysteries of being, the postmodern antidetective bogs down, even wallows in the mystery. (326)

Hutcheon, too, has commented on this subject (Narcissistic Narrative 31-32). The desire to track down the story places Coming Through Slaughter in the company of much early postmodern fiction. And like much early postmodern fiction, the point is that the truth cannot be conclusively pinned down.

It must be noted, however, that there may also be a more individual reason that Ondaatje chooses to play with the detective story style. His own approach to writing is like the detective’s approach to a mystery. He has said that when writing he is usually only two or three pages ahead of the reader. He is sometimes surprised by things that happen in his own work (Wachtel 252-53). He says, “For me the process of writing, therefore, has to be a learning or discovering as opposed to just a telling or an entertaining” (240). He takes seriously his role as an investigating detective. This being the case, characters who help him unearth the story are a natural choice.
The story of Buddy Bolden is one surrounded by silence. The novel opens with the narrator advising the reader to "[f]loat by in a car" (8). The entire description of Bolden's "geography" has a subdued tone, as though the area exists in a vacuum. The very act of driving in a car tends to separate the viewer from the viewed. The streets are quiet and empty. The buildings where Bolden lived and worked offer no testimony to his life. As George Elliott Clarke states, this "natural forgetfulness echoes the vast silence of Bolden's biography" (10). Ondaatje plucks his character from the silence, clothes him in words, and then returns him to whence he came. The author's detective-like approach to his subject forces the reader to assume the same sort of stance. Given the ongoing efforts to seek out pieces of the story, it is small wonder that silence becomes a major theme in the novel.

Here again Coming Through Slaughter shares common ground with many other early postmodern novels whose protagonists disappear into silence--Gone Indian and Blown Figures to name just two. However, Coming Through Slaughter goes much farther to actually articulate the main character's flirtation with silence and his final retreat into it. Unlike his counterparts in other novels, Bolden seems aware of the danger his fascination poses. Also differentiating him from his counterparts is the fact that Bolden's story does not end abruptly when he falls silent.

The Buddy Bolden that the reader is first introduced to is at the other end of the chart from silence. In fact, he shows a distinct aversion to silence. His love of a story is both famous and excessive. He is characterized as a "social dog" who "talked always
to three or four people at once” (56). The narrator says that he could talk “men out of ten year mustaches and simultaneously offered raw steaming scandal that brought up erections in the midst of their fear” (12). He possesses a gregarious nature that attracts an audience no matter what he is doing.

N. Joseph’s Shaving Parlour is more of a stage on which Bolden performs for an audience than a place of business. The room is furnished with “several old donated armchairs where customers or more often just visitors sat talking and drinking” (12). Those who genuinely want a shave or haircut come early in the morning, before Bolden has had too much to drink. Most people gather there for the entertainment, whether it be Bolden’s stories or some poor innocent who wanders in for a shave too late in the day. In this as in all things, Bolden exhibits an extreme need for attention, perhaps as a form of validation.

Bolden’s role as a “receiver” in this novel should be kept in mind. For this reason, it is not only his gift for talking that draws people to him, it is also “his ability to be an animated listener” (42). The narrator states that “he reacted excessively to the stories his clients in the chair told him, throwing himself into the situation” (42). He is the “perfect audience” because he so fully absorbs any speaker’s story. The speaker “in need of confession or a sense of proportion” sees himself reflected in Bolden (42). But the result is that Bolden’s “mind became the street” (42). And like a street in which the traffic runs two ways, Bolden finds his mind must ship the stories out as quickly as they come in.
As though the oral telling is not enough for the rush of stories pouring out of Bolden's mind, he also puts out written versions. His paper *The Cricket* "took in and published all the information Bolden could find. It respected stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies" (24). All versions of the story receive equal attention from Bolden. Information gleaned from "customers in the chair and from spiders among the whores and police" is all equally valid. The narrator says, "Bolden took all the thick facts and dropped them into his pail of sub-history" (24).

He is no more selective about his audiences than he is about the stories he collects. Bolden's hold-nothing-back style of communication is extended to his children. On their walks to school "[h]e taught them all he was thinking of or had heard, all he knew at the moment, treating them as adults..." (13). This, of course, makes them the envy of the schoolyard. However, the children, while learning "the politics of the street," also learn "to sift down to the real" of what they are hearing (13).

Bolden, on the other hand, is entirely incapable of sifting through his own stories. There is no silent place in his mind where the stories can pause and organize before rushing back out: "All the information he was given put unedited into the broadsheet" (13). His relationship with Nora is yet another example. He is so immersed in studying all aspects of her that "[h]e was lost in the details, he could find no exact focus towards her. [. . .] Bolden could not put things in their place" (15). There is some temptation to think that he occasionally tries to impose order on the chaos--when Nora's mother is found dead, "his mind went into theories" (26). But there
is even more evidence that his "mind was helpless against every moment's headline" (15).

Bolden approaches his music in much the same way as he approaches language. In Coming Through Slaughter music is also a form of communication:

He [Webb] watched him dive into the stories found in the barbershop, his whole plot of song covered with scandal and incident and change. [. . .] Up there on stage he was showing all the possibilities in the middle of the story. (43)

This casts his desire for theories in a different light. They do not represent a desire for order; they are simply more possibilities in "the middle of the story". His music is every bit as undisciplined as his stories.

Bolden's music has "so little wisdom" for the same reason that his stories have none. There is no editing process. He is "obsessed with the magic of air, those smells that turned neuter as they revolved in his lung then spat out in the chosen key" (14). The air is inhaled the same way the stories are and sent back out as music just as quickly. There is no pause for thought. The music is "immediate, dated in half an hour" (43). For this reason Frank Lewis says, "If you never heard him play someplace where the weather for instance could change the next series of notes--then you should never have heard him at all" (37). His hold-nothing-back style of conversation is repeated in his music. Lewis goes on with his explanation: "[S]ee his music was immediately on top of his own life."
Echoing. As if, when he was playing he was lost and hunting for the right accidental notes" (37).

Bolden is indeed searching. From the vantage point of whichever stage he happens to be on at the moment, he is constantly searching for "the perfect audience." He searches from "whichever stage" because all aspects of Bolden's life are performance. An easy assumption is that his enormous ego is what propels him to centre stage. However, it is highly possible that the ego is part of a mask: "And there is my grin which is my loudest scream ever" (69). Questioning people about Bolden's disappearance, Webb finds that "[t]heir stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them" (63). Bolden is the "perfect audience." He reflects what people expect to see. The image becomes so strong that he feels "[e]verytime you stopped playing you became a lie" (59). He finally comes to realize that people's expectations have become a trap, "that reputation made the room narrower and narrower" (86). He had lived in the "world of audiences where [he] had tried to catch everything thrown at [him]" (91). In spite of the crowds that surround him, he tells Webb, "I'm scared Webb, don't think I will find one person who will be the right audience" (89).

As Bolden is a "perfect audience" because he catches everything thrown at him, his perfect audience would catch everything he throws. The perfect audience would act as a mirror. It would reflect his own image back to him. Mirrors play an important role in Coming Through Slaughter for this reason. He notes that as he cuts people's hair they "watch their own faces for the twenty minutes they sit below me"
(48). Just before their fight Pickett watches Bolden in the mirror, trying to judge Bolden’s mood (72). Pickett’s inability to do so points to the elusive quality of the mirror image. Again when Bolden finds another musician playing in his place in Lincoln Park, he returns to the barber shop and sits, crying “in one of the chairs looking into a mirror” (80). The narrator feels a sense of recognition when he “read he stood in front of mirrors and attacked himself [. . .]. Defiling people we did not wish to be” (133). The face Bolden is both searching for and attacking in the mirror is his own. He attacks the mirror image because it is silent. Bolden requires feedback from his reflection.

Finally, this is most clearly illustrated by the dancer who becomes Bolden’s perfect audience, “mirroring my throat” (130). She catches and reflects his music back to him, “hitting each note with her body before it is even out so I know what I do through her” (130). He is finally able to see himself clearly: “God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere” (130).

Bolden’s search for an authentic identity is heralded in the novel by the appearance of the sonograph on the first page. The dolphin’s whistle identifies him as a species and as an individual, much as a bird’s call does, while the squawks are of an emotional nature. As Winfried Siemerling says “the whistle is thetic” (119), while the squawks are limbic in origin. The narrator says no one knows how the dolphin makes two sounds simultaneously (6). Since Bolden has “no control except the mood of his power,” he certainly does not know (Coming Through Slaughter 37). In the midst of his
emotional squawks, he loses sight of his identification whistle. The theme of lost identity is carried on in the photograph that both is and is not Bolden: "who in this bad film seemed to have already half receded with that smile which may not have been a smile at all, which may have been his mad dignity" (53).

The two things Bolden fears most are the two things that undeniably ruin the possibilities of the story: certainty and death. He finds the possibilities he loves in the middle and both of these things represent endings. Certainty represents a type of enforced silence, at least in Bolden's view. Once the story is carved in stone, there is nothing more to say. Death, as it is treated here, is a form of absolute silence. Bolden uses his stories and music to protect himself from the finality of certainty and death. He is, thus, able to keep the possibilities alive. In this novel, not even the absolute silence in which Bolden is eventually trapped kills the possibilities.

The reader is introduced to Bolden's fear of and fascination with death early in the novel. The narrator says, "Looked at objectively The Cricket contained excessive reference to death. The possibilities were terrifying to Bolden and he hunted out examples obsessively as if building a wall. A boy with a fear of heights climbing slowly up a tree" (24). "There were his dreams of his children dying" (24) is echoed four pages later, followed by a description of the dream (28-29). Most interestingly at the bottom of the page on which the first reference is found, the narrator says "And then there was the first death, almost on top of him, saved by its fictional quality and nothing else" (24). Strangely Webb's
eventual theory that the old lady must have been strangled by her snake satisfies both his need for certainty and Bolden’s need for fiction.

Webb’s need for certainty is the aspect of his character that prevents him from being a “receiver.” Although he is the actual detective in the “detective story,” his stance towards the story is much too aggressive. The play on words—“You’re a cop Webb”(19)—noted by Siemerling goes far to explain the difference between Webb and Bolden (Discoveries of the Other 123). Webb is driven to track down the story, and like a spider, trap all the pieces in the web and hold them there. As the old lady and the snake theory shows, for Webb the stories must have endings. Bolden’s approach is much more passive. The stories come to him and it is their uncertain flow that holds his interest.

The reader is warned early that Bolden is “almost completely governed by fears of certainty” (15). At one point Frank Lewis says, “We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order” (37). However, in the same breath he continues “what was outside it” (37). If “there was a discipline” to his music, it was aimed at staying outside of certainty:

He distrusted it in anyone but Nora for there it went to the spine, and yet he attacked it again and again in her, cruelly, hating it, the sure lanes of the probable (15–16).

The point at which Bolden is able to appreciate the “carefully patterned,” “clear forms” of Robichaux’s waltzes is perhaps one of his lowest in the novel (93). It comes during a lonely period of time
spent at Webb's cabin, attempting to re-evaluate his life and prepare himself for a return to music and society--a return he is not ready for. At the Jewitt's he "wanted to find that fear of certainties I had when I first began to play [. . .]. And Robin and Jaelin brought me back to that open fright" (86). Certainty destroys the possibilities in his music. To some extent it destroys the possibility of his music, for he, at least, equates his move away from music with his loss of the fear of certainty.

As noted before, certainty, death and silence all share a certain quality of being absolute. The major difference is the first two brook no argument. They are or they are not: "and pain in my heart sure as death" (131). Silence, at this point in Bolden's adventure, is more in the nature of the deep silence described by Dauenhaur. Deep silence, in theory at least, can be toyed with. It can be entered and exited at will. Silence would have been Bolden's middle ground had he learned to use it properly. It would have provided the space he needed in order to find balance. There is reason to believe that up to a certain point in the story the possibility is strong that Bolden will learn how to use silence.

There is a general consensus among characters in the novel that "Bellocq corrupted him with that mean silence" (145). Nora explains her hatred for the photographer: "Look at what he did to you" (127). But Bolden himself defends the friendship: "Whatever I say about him you will interpret as the working of an enemy and what I loved Webb were the possibilities in his silence" (91). He realizes that people blame Bellocq for his initial retreat and denies it. Even while Bellocq tempts Bolden "out of the world of audiences," he offers him
a different landscape: "Put your hand through this window" (91). Bellocq does not corrupt Bolden with silence; he merely invites him to explore its possibilities.

As already stated Bolden is fascinated, above all else, by possibility. Even Bellocq is surprised at the enthusiasm with which Bolden explores the new terrain: "They had talked for hours moving gradually off the edge of the social world. As Bellocq lived at the edge in any case he was at ease there and as Buddy did not he moved on past him like a naive explorer looking for footholds. Bellocq did not expect that" (64). Living at the edge, he initially takes his own understanding for granted. He is surprised by how completely foreign the territory can be for one as " enviably public" as Bolden.

The final sentence of this passage states that he "had always thought his friend to be the patronizing one, now he discovered it was himself" (64). His position of superiority in their friendship is derived from the fact that he knows instinctively many things that Bolden is only beginning to suspect. For example, he knows "[t]he mystic privacy one can be so proud of has no alphabet of noise or meaning to the people outside" (64). He also knows what Bolden’s audiences do not—that Bolden is neither his music nor his public face. Bolden acknowledges him as "the friend who scorned all the giraffes of fame. [. . . ] Him watching me waste myself and wanting me to step back into my body as if into a black room and stumble against whatever was there" (91). Finally he knows that Bolden can only step back into his own body—find his own face in the mirror—from within the "mystic privacy"—from within the silence.
Apparently Bellocq’s ability as a guide is limited. The view he offers is not enough, for Bolden moves on past him in his exploration. If Bellocq is a place where Bolden can visit silence, Shell Beach is a place where he can live with it. He thinks of the Brewitts as “[t]he silent ones. Post music. After ambition” (39). At this point Bolden is still experimenting with silence, still exploring its possibilities.

He spends two days sinking “through the pavement into the music of the town of Shell Beach” (41) before arriving at the Brewitts’ door. He listens “to poor jazz in the halls. Listening hard so he was playing all the good notes in his brain his mouth flourishing whenever the players missed or avoided them” (40). Instead of sleeping he listens “to the others there talk--where to hustle, the weather in Gretna. He took it in and locked it” (40). In an entirely uncharacteristic manner he is “[a]lways listening, listening to the wet fluid speech with no order, unfinished stories, badly told jokes that he sober as a spider perfected in silence” (40). For the first time in his life, he collects the noise, the music and stories, “a full fat king,” and allows them to linger in his mind rather than immediately spitting them back out.

Then he goes to the Brewitts’ where he is “anonymous and alone in a white room with no history and no parading,” where Robin “drained [his] body of its fame” (86). With them Bolden is no longer the culmination of his reputation, of his own stories: “I am the famous fucker. I am the famous barber. I am the famous cornet player. Read the labels” (106). Here he is able to shed the labels. During
his entire stay with the Brewitts, the possibility that Bolden will achieve a lasting balance between the social and the silence exists.

The possibility only ends with the untimely arrival of Webb. Whether or not Bolden would ever have been ready to return to his old world is not clear. What is clear is that, at this point in time, he is not ready. He escapes Webb’s argument into the only silence available: “Bolden went under water away from the noise” (83). Unfortunately he is also away from the air. When his lungs force him to resurface, Webb has won, and silence has changed from a refuge to “a huge, wild animal going round and round the bathroom” (84).

Bolden is quite aware that Webb bred him “into something better” and does not resent the fact. Indeed it saved him “a lot of energy” (89). It is another instance of the malleable nature of Bolden’s character that Webb “talked and sucked [him] through his brain so [he] was puppet... he was directing [him] like wayward traffic back home” (86). Webb is able to do this despite the fact that he is directing Bolden to a place “[w]here [Bolden does not] want these answers” (89). Once again he feels like “a parcel on a bus” (106). It should be noted that parcels do not place themselves on busses. They are always the objects of the action. The fact that he can be so easily pointed and directed is a large part of what makes him the “perfect audience.”

Going home for Bolden means slipping back into all the aspects of his life he had tried to escape. Although Webb had “placed my past and future on this table like a road”, it is his past that overwhelms him (86). His second night home, the once gregarious talker goes “[p]arading around alone” (118). Watching the mattress whores “step
into the white” he thinks, “My brain tonight has a mattress strapped to its back” (119). Unable to simply walk away, the whores and Bolden carry their past lives strapped to their backs, although figuratively in Bolden’s case.

It is, however, a life that now seems ridiculous to Bolden. Looking over old copies of the Cricket, he remembers, “There had been such sense in it” (113). It had been so important to him to tell every story. Having experienced something other than his old “hold nothing back” style of telling, he now sees his old attempts to tell all in a harsher light: “Cricket noises and Cricket music for that is what we are when watched by people bigger than us” (113-114). This is an indication that Bolden has already gone too far, for cricket noises, like dolphin whistles and human stories, are a cricket’s own individual way of identifying themselves, of declaring their existence to the world.

Cornish immediately notices the difference in Bolden: “A long silence. Cornish thought this is the longest time I’ve ever been with him without talking. You never saw Bolden thinking, lots of people said that. He thought by being in motion. Always talk, snatches of song, as if his brain had been a fishbowl” (109). When his friends attempt to entertain “him with the sort of stories he loved to hear, stories he could predict now. He sat back with just his face laughing at the jokes. It was like walking out of a desert into a park of schoolchildren” (120). Silence is no longer beckoning. It is threatening. And Bolden has already begun to disappear into it: “So in the public parade he went mad into silence” (108).
If the events of the parade are considered separately from the rest of the novel, the reader might believe that Bolden experiences some form of epiphany, a moment of perfect communication before he falls forever into silence. The narrator says, "[h]is mind on the pinnacle of something collapsed" (133). Hillis Miller, at the height of deconstruction, claimed that the only reason we continue to write poetry or make love is that we cannot get it right. Either one done perfectly just once would remove the necessity of ever repeating the act. Wittgenstein makes a similar statement about silence being the ultimate goal of philosophy.

In the case of Bolden, however, this does not seem probable. The entire novel chronicles his desperate attempt to communicate everything. This approach has not worked for him. With Bolden now on the brink of insanity, it does not seem likely that the real world suddenly offers up perfection. It seems more probable that it is his own desperate longing for that moment of perfect communication, that "perfect audience," that conjures up the girl and sends him over the edge. The vast majority of this section is told by a first person narrator. No one else ever mentions the girl. The reader has no way of knowing if she really exists or if she is a figment of Bolden’s mind, a mind the stability of which is already in question. His loss of consciousness in a pool of his own blood is emphasized by a sudden switch to a third person narrator. As proof of the intensity with which his mind is focused on the idea of the perfect audience, his last thought is, "What I wanted" (131).

Ironically the silence Bolden escapes into seems to contain aspects of the two things he fears most. There is a certainty about
it. Webb tells Bella, "he'd always expected Bolden to jump out of his silence when he got bored, shit I was sure he was just hiding you know hiding from us all" (149). But he is wrong, Bolden's retreat is absolute. Although he lives another twenty-four years in the hospital, for all intents and purposes he is, to his audiences, dead. For unknown reasons, Nora writes Webb that Bolden has died. And for eight years, he assumes this to be the truth. However, Bolden's silence only has the appearance of death to those on the outside. Willy Cornish says, "With all his friends outside like they were on a grandstand watching him and when they began to realize he would never come out then all the people he hardly knew, all the fools, beginning to talk about him" (145). Bolden is already being turned into the kind of myth that most people have to die to become. Bolden's story does not stop when he ceases to articulate it.

Nor does his life stop when he slips from sight. The narrator actually takes the reader inside the silence in which Bolden now dwells, inside his mind. The reader is given to believe that Bolden is still exploring the possibilities. For the most part the world in general is like his fellow inmate, Lord, whose noise is "So constant it was like wallpaper and Bolden could blot himself against it without even having to turn away the meaning of the words, using the noise as a bark around himself" (141). However, when the world does something worth noting, he is quite capable of paying attention. Although he has not "listened to the shadow who had been using his silence as an oracle," when Lord makes an escape attempt, Bolden is "for the first time impressed" (141).
This section also calls into play the question of who, if anyone, can tell a true story, especially about someone else. And who has the right to try? As noted earlier, long before his death, people are already telling their versions of Bolden’s story. As if he is aware of this and rejects it, Bolden says, or rather thinks, "Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth" (140). This is the last first person comment Bolden makes in the novel.

The friendship with the sunlight serves two purposes. It establishes the level that Bolden’s mind is functioning at and the fact that he is still telling his own story if only to himself. The first encounter with the sunbeam is told in the first person. The possibilities of Bolden’s story are not limited by his silence. They are, however, limited in terms of audiences. Or to rephrase the old existential question, “If a story is told and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?” The suggestion here is that the silence and the story are not in complete opposition to each other. The existence of one does not automatically destroy the other. There is always the possibility of coexistence. And so the ground is set for The English Patient.
The English Patient

If Coming Through Slaughter chronicles a man’s journey into silence, The English Patient chronicles the journey of a group of people out of silence. In The English Patient the possibilities Buddy Bolden saw in silence assume concrete shape. Silence is no longer the opposite pole of communication. It is now a backdrop out of which the stories are formed. Through telling and retelling the characters attempt to approach some semblance of truth. What emerges overall is the extreme importance of telling the story, no matter the flaws.

Although The English Patient has a much more coherent story line than Coming Through Slaughter, Ondaatje still employs several techniques that can be identified as postmodern to remind the reader of the story in process. There are several examples of what have become traditional jumps in the story line. For example, most of the story is told in present tense, by a third person omniscient narrator. Not surprisingly, the English patient tells most of his story in the first person, past tense. He does, however, occasionally lapse into third person narration, underlining the uncertainty of his own identity. There are other shifts in tense for obvious reasons: a description of something that happened yesterday, or an hour ago, or will happen next month.

There are momentary glimpses into the future throughout the novel. At one point the narrator says, “later she will realize he never allowed himself to be beholden to her, or her to him” (128). Later in the story there is the comment, “wherever Hana is now, in the future, she is aware of the line of movement Kip’s body followed
out of her life" (282). These references to things that will happen serve to focus attention on the process of telling or creating a story, despite the relatively chronological order of the plot. This is a technique used very sparingly in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Early in that novel the narrator says, "[H]e is wrong. Bolden will take two more years before he cruises home" (21). For the most part, however, this technique is unnecessary, since the same effect is achieved by *Coming Through Slaughter*’s constant jumps in time. The reader knows what will happen long before he or she knows how it happens.

*The English Patient* also contains shifts into the past tense for no apparent reason, as in the chapter that begins, "A party began in the English patient’s room when Caravaggio revealed the gramophone he had found somewhere" (107). The effect of this manoeuvre is to give the impression that for the most part the narrator is experiencing the immediacy of watching events unfold before his or her eyes. The sudden swing to past tense seems to indicate that the narrator has abruptly become aware that the story being recounted happened long ago and is happening now only in his or her mind. The swings in narrative tense proclaim the existence of a second level narrator of the sort found in *Coming Through Slaughter*. And the effect is the same. The technique works to warn the reader of the second-hand nature of the tale, since the narrator at no point actively enters the story, at least not in any fashion made obvious to the reader.

The narrator does, however, intervene in the written story on several occasions. The first occasion is in reference to Hana and Kip: "How much she is in love with him or he with her we don’t know" (127). Both narrator and reader are drawn into speculation on the
events they are witnessing. This conspiracy tends to foreground the reader’s role in interpreting what is being presented. Such an act of interpretation is one that the characters in The English Patient are constantly involved in. The next instance reinforces the reader’s awareness of the story being told. The narrator makes a direct reference to this fact by calling Caravaggio “[o]ne of the two older men in this story” (253; emphasis added).

The final intervention occurs in the last pages of the book and is very like the narratorial intervention at the end of Coming Through Slaughter. Here the narrator clearly identifies him or herself as the creator of the story: “She is a woman I don’t know well enough to hold in my wing, if writers have wings, to harbour for the rest of my life” (301). There is a curious echo of this statement early in the novel when Hana acknowledges, “Caravaggio would disturb you by simply enfolding you in his arms, his wings” (48). This is the only connection made between Caravaggio and the narrator, and it is, therefore, a difficult connection to maintain. It is, however, equally difficult to believe that Ondaatje would not be aware of having made such a connection.

In any event, the first quotation accentuates the questions raised by the entire final section. In these last pages the narrator half describes and half imagines the lives of Kip and Hana thirteen years after the summer at the villa:

Now where does he sit as he thinks of her? These years later.[. . .] He sits in the garden. And he watches Hana, her hair longer, in her own country. And what does she
do? [. . .] And Hana moves possibly in the company that is not her choice. (299-301)

These passages are designed to give the impression that Kip and Hana are real people whose lives did not stop at the end of the story of the summer of 1945. The reader is being offered a glimpse of how their lives have moved on as proof. However, the narrator's confession that he or she is a writer casts all that came before in doubt. The story is a creation, after all, and the move into the future is simply a final attempt to flesh out the characters. The narrator ends by acknowledging that a person—real or otherwise probably makes little difference—cannot be captured sufficiently to be held in the wings of the writer.

In terms of content, The English Patient is, in a very general manner, about a world attempting to come to terms with World War II. Silence is the only response in the face of the unimaginable. Simon Sibelman claims another "form of silence has evolved in postwar literature: Survival silence, that of the survivor who witnessed the inexpressible" (20). He goes on to say:

The fundamental belief in the autonomy of the word made possible the whole movement of humanism. Yet the Holocaust persists in demonstrating the inadequacy of the word to transmit even marginally the scope and gravity of the event. (21)

This falls into the category of personal silence since it takes place on an individual level. Ondaatje's novel deals with neither the political nor the moral aspects of the Holocaust. Rather it takes as its starting point the state of silence imposed by war.
In many ways the four people the novel focuses on are representative of what Europe and much of the rest of the world are experiencing. Although the war is more of a backdrop to *The English Patient* than a subject of it, there is a scene in which the move out of silence is depicted on a larger scale. In Gabicce Kip watches as the townspeople bring a five foot, plaster statue of the Virgin Mary into the town. She is rowed in from the silent darkness of the sea and carried through the streets “while the band marched ahead of her in silence” to the spot she is to occupy (79). With this gesture the people are taking the first step out of the silence—although only symbolically—and are reclaiming their town, their religion and their world.

Although all the characters in *The English Patient* are involved in this process through giving and receiving stories, Hana fills the role of “receiver” in this novel as Bolden did in *Coming Through Slaughter*. As heiress to all of Patrick’s stories in *In The Skin of a Lion*, it is a role for which she has been well prepared. That entire novel is a story a young girl gathers in a car during the early hours of the morning. [. . . ] She listens to the man as he picks up and brings together various corners of the story, attempting to carry it all in his arms (1). So ingrained is the habit that it takes on physical characteristics, and “her body [is] full of stories and situations” (37). Whether the tale be spoken, written or in the eyes of another, the effect on Hana is the same: “She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that
stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments” (12). This is very reminiscent of the description of Bolden as a “full, fat King.”

The main difference here is that at the point in time when Bolden is thus described, he is in the process of learning how to hold the stories inside. At this point in her life, Hana is learning how to let them go. The war has made her recipient of too many stories of tragedy:

Hello Buddy. Good-bye Buddy. Caring was brief. There was a contract only until death. Nothing in her spirit or past had taught her to be a nurse. But cutting her hair was a contract, and it lasted until they were bivouacked in the Villa San Girolamo north of Florence. (51).

She cuts her hair with the ‘irritation of its presence during the previous days still in her mind [. . .]. She would have nothing to link her, to lock her, to death” (49-50). The act, however, also has the effect of leaving her more exposed to the world. Caravaggio notes, “A lean face with hair cut short, without the mask and mystery of her long hair” (33). With this simple act, she attempts to cut herself free of the horror she is witnessing but at the same time she leaves herself more open and vulnerable to the stories of others. It is notable that in the final pages of the novel Kip is granted occasional glimpses of “her character and the lengthening of her dark hair, which falls again and then again into her eyes” (300).

In the condition that the army refers to as shell shock, Hana is probably very close to Bolden’s condition in Shell Beach. Personal silence is still a benign refuge that can be entered and exited at
will. In order to preserve her sanity, Hana has retreated into herself. She "continued her duties while she secretly pulled her personal self back" (178). At first she is simply shielding herself from the stories of the strangers around her: "Even among those she worked closely with she hardly talked during the war" (85). But then the horror begins to seep into her own story. She tells Caravaggio that after the death of her unborn child "I stepped so far back no one could get near me" (85).

Patrick’s death is the final blow that causes her to completely retreat into silence:

She has missed Clara with a woe but is unable to write to her, now, after all that has happened to her. She cannot bear to talk of or even acknowledge the death of Patrick.

(92)

She is ironically repeating Patrick’s reaction to death in In the Skin of a Lion. While in jail, he stops speaking in order to hold Alice in his mind. Although Hana longs to reach out to her stepmother, Hana cannot break her silence without losing Patrick. Nothing is real until it is spoken.

Retreating into personal silence is also Caravaggio’s approach to the horrors of war. In his case, however, the horror is of a physical nature; his body is living testimony to the unspeakable something. The refuge provided by the hospital where he is treated for his injuries allows him to indulge in all the eccentricities of a “war hero”:

During all that time he had never spoken, communicating by signals and grimaces, now and then a grin. He had revealed
nothing, not even his name [. . .]. That was how he felt safest. Revealing nothing. Whether they came at him with tenderness or subterfuge or knives. For more than four months he had not said a word. (27)

Echoing the moment in Coming Through Slaughter when silence becomes "a huge animal," Caravaggio is described in his silence as "a large animal in their presence" (27). But there would seem to be two different types of animal at work here. In Coming Through Slaughter silence takes on a life of its own and is dangerous. In The English Patient the animal that silence becomes is contained within Caravaggio--personal silence. The result is that when it serves his purpose to do so, he is able to step out of the silence back into the world of speech with no other effect than surprising his doctors (2).

The English patient also consciously takes refuge in personal silence. Of the three characters mentioned so far, his use of silence is, perhaps, the most contrived. He has good reason for not wanting certain parts of his story to be known. Although he admits he speaks German, the army's interrogations are to no avail (95-6). To name himself would be to place himself directly in the camp of the enemy. The most immediate, although not the only, effect of his identification would be to endanger his own life. There are, therefore, large parts of his story that must remain unspoken.

A secondary effect of his refusal to name himself is a loss of authority in his stories. Caravaggio points out, "We're in a huge field when we talk to that guy. We don't even know if he's English. He's probably not" (121). In a huge field, as in the desert, one can easily become disoriented or lost if there is no point of reference.
The English patient leaves his own stories completely without point of reference; if he is anchored to nothing, there is no way to prove the legitimacy of what he is saying. Since he can claim no authority, his tales must be taken entirely on faith.

Despite the mystery in which the English patient shrouds himself, he has no shortage of stories to tell: "[H]e talks all the time, he just doesn’t know who he is" (28). Under interrogation he "had rambled on, driving them mad, traitor or ally, leaving them never quite sure who he was”(96). Although the morphine may have a role in this, his rambling has the urgency of a man who is telling his way through his life towards his own death. He knows he is coming to the end of his story and wishes to come to terms with all he has experienced.

The desire to put "things into place" (255) is made even more difficult by the fact that his and Katharine’s is a passion marked by cruelty. They constantly expect “the mood of calmness between them to swerve to violence” (150). The narrator asks, “And if she has brought him to this, what has he brought her to?” (155). He makes no attempt to deny or justify the cruelty: “Don’t we forgive everything of a lover? We forgive selfishness, desire, guile. As long as we are the motive for it” (170). He is telling the story more in an attempt to understand how two people completely in love can ultimately and literally destroy each other.

In some ways, the English patient’s desire to impose order on events is an aspect of his fascination with maps. A master of the art—“Give me a map and I’ll build you a city”—in his hands maps become much more than mere diagrams of a space (145). To him maps are
the entire story of a place—all it has been, all it has known, all
that has transpired there is contained in whatever map he is looking
at. He tells Hana, “I am a man who can recognize an unnamed town by
its skeletal shape on a map. I have always had information like a sea
in me. [. . .] So history enters us. [. . .] So I knew their place
before I crashed among them, knew when Alexander had traversed it in
an earlier age” (18). As he has charted his way through the story of
the desert, he is now charting his way through the story of his life.

The second reason behind the English patient’s stories is of a
more complicated nature. He tells Caravaggio:

We die containing a richness of lovers and tribes, tastes
we have swallowed, bodies we have plunged into and swum up
as if rivers of wisdom, characters we have climbed into as
if trees, fears we have hidden in as if caves. I wish for
all this to be marked on my body when I am dead. I believe
in such cartography—to be marked by nature, not just to
label ourselves on a map like the names of rich men and
women on buildings. We are communal histories, communal
books. (261)

Much of what can be said about the novel as a whole is contained in
this passage. The man who has described himself frequently as being
happiest without nation or name, as being in love with his own
anonymity, has come to realize that he is the sum of his experiences.
He is his story. The desire to be anonymous is altered by the
immensity of the ultimate and absolute silence he is facing. There is
something akin to panic in the knowledge that all the “richness” he
contains will cease to be. He has realized, however, that his story,
like the frequently mentioned paintings on the cave wall, can continue on as testament to his existence—his "mark on the wall."

But only if he tells it. And so the man for whom "the greatest betrayal of [himself] would be to reveal one more inch of [his] character" is driven to talk (174). It is interesting to note that when faced with his own version of absolute silence, Bolden begins to see his attempt to record the world—The Cricket—as ridiculous. Or perhaps more accurately, it is his loss of faith that pushes him towards the final silence.

Ironically although he asks Caravaggio, "Or am I just a book? Something to be read," the English patient wants all he has experienced to be marked on his body (253). There is a distinction made here between being "marked by nature" and "label[ling] ourselves." In order to at least approach authenticity the body (story) should reflect what has happened, not just what the individual would like to have known. In a very literal sense, the bodies of most of the characters in the novel have been marked by their experiences. At the risk of cliché, the English patient has been burned by his passion. Caravaggio has been relieved of his thumbs and therefore, as a thief, of some part of his identity. And Hana, in her effort to withdraw from her experiences, has cut off her own hair.

Like the English patient, Caravaggio and Hana have an urgent need to speak their stories. The half-destroyed villa is a perfect reflection of the state of mind of the people gathered in it. The silence in which they have taken refuge is repeated by this place. The narrator's comment that "[w]ar has unbalanced [Caravaggio] and he
can return to no other world as he is" (116) is also true of Hana. She wonders "[w]here was and what was Toronto anymore in her mind" (50). They will be unable to emerge from the silence of the abandoned villa and rejoin their own lives until they have emerged from their own silence.

Although physically more wounded than Hana, Caravaggio is emotionally more intact. At first “[m]ortal vanity” causes him to hide “his hands below the table, watching the girl eat” (39), or to keep “his hands always in his pockets” (49). Nonetheless he is able to move quite quickly from great reluctance to discussing the event to being able to tell Hana the whole story. He is able at the same time to admit that, despite the horror of the actual event, he is even more haunted by the fear that perhaps in his pain, he “told them everything” (60). This is not to suggest that upon uttering the words, he is immediately cured. But, perhaps because the physical nature of his infliction precludes denial, he is able to take the first steps sooner than Hana.

Although she and Caravaggio acknowledge Patrick’s death and at one point she muses about him (90-1), Hana is not able to tell what she knows of her father’s death until after Kip leaves the villa. Only in the last pages of the novel is she finally able to break her silence and write to Clara that Patrick died in a dovecot: “His unit had left him, burned and wounded. So burned the buttons of his shirt were part of his skin, part of his dear chest” (295). A very short time before this she counters Caravaggio’s offer to tell her a birthday story with “Not about Patrick, okay? [. . . ] I still can’t listen to those stories, David” (266).
Until she writes to Clara, the reader is not entirely aware of the nature of the impact Patrick's death has on Hana. Like Caravaggio, the facts of the event do not haunt her as much as the "what ifs." Her father was burned and left to die alone. She tells Clara, "I was a nurse and I could have nursed him. [. . .] I could have saved him or at least been with him till the end. [. . .] How long was he alone with doves and rats? [. . .] Unable to sleep in the darkness. He always hated darkness" (296). Finally her devotion to the English patient does not seem so strange. Only at this point is she ready to leave the villa: "I am sick of Europe, Clara. I want to come home" (296).

Even though Hana refuses to tell her entire story for most of the novel, she is, of all the characters, the one most in need of human communication. When Caravaggio, "the uncle from childhood" (54) appears, she is "glad to see [him]. No one else" (33). She admits to herself that she has "needed an uncle" before she tells him of her experiences as a nurse and of losing the child (85). Until her complete withdrawal from humanity, the unborn baby fills this need. She "had continued conversations with the child [. . .] who [she] shared everything with" (82).

The need for communication translates into a strong role for intertextuality in this novel. The importance of books and stories to the process of restructuring these characters' lives cannot be overemphasized. There are several indications that the sense of individual identity and the sense of civilization are closely linked; and a civilization's identity can be found in its books. The war has destroyed not only the physical aspects of civilization, but also the
sense of civilization each person carries in his or her own mind. Along with the loss of beliefs about human society and how they fit into it comes a loss of an identity that the characters are attempting to recover through books.

Hana has remained at the villa because, like Caravaggio, it is impossible for her to continue on with her own life until she has come to some sort of understanding of what has happened to her. In her search for order, she turns to books. The narrator says, “this was the time in her life that she fell upon books as the only door out of her cell. They became half her world” (7). She spends a good deal of time browsing through the half ruined library for new books. When she tires of reading, she begins to write in the blank spaces of the books. So intent is she on filling herself with stories other than the ones she has experienced that she continues to read even after her audience has fallen asleep: “So the books of the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms” (7). The Englishman, too, is using the books to organize his internal chaos. He seems to already be familiar with most of what Hana is reading, so the gaps in the plot do not concern him greatly. It is in the momentary silences in the reading that he begins to offer up his own story.

To Hana the Englishman’s tales are just a more immediate, more human version of the books. For this reason his identity is never of great importance to her. All that matters is that she be given something different to think about: “Okay, tell me, she thought, take me somewhere” (57). His need to tell is met by her equal need to hear: “He whispers again, dragging the listening heart of the young
nurse beside him to wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died" (4). She gains possession of Caravaggio’s story for much the same reason. It is one more item to balance against and help organize all the rest. She realizes with pleasure that he has “given her something. His motive, a drama, and a stolen image” (36). Years later, long after the burned patient has admitted to being Almásy, Hana still thinks of the “poems the Englishman read out loud” (301). Who he really is holds no importance to her because it is not his identity that she hopes to find through all the stories. It is her own.

Although to Caravaggio “books are mystical creatures” (81), the stories are important to him, also. Like Hana, he is trying to make sense of what is left of his world. However, while Hana would have a balance in her stories, between love and cruelty, peace and war, Caravaggio requires a much more meticulous sense of order in his. Like Webb in Coming Through Slaughter, Caravaggio needs certainty. The identity of the English patient is of such extreme importance to him that he becomes obsessed with it:

He watches the man in the bed. He needs to know who this Englishman from the desert is, and reveal him for Hana’s sake. Or perhaps invent a skin for him, the way tannic acid camouflage a burned man’s rawness. [. . .] But here they were shedding skins. They could imitate nothing but what they were. There was no defense but to look for the truth in others. (117)

That Caravaggio might either reveal the Englishman or invent him a new skin shows an ambiguity towards his own motivations. It is
certainly not for Hana’s sake that he wants to know. When he finally has all the pieces of the puzzle, he tells Hana: “He’s fine. We can let him be” (265). At another point he tells Álmasy: “Quite honestly, I’ve become more fond of you than most of the people I worked with” (252).

His real reason for wanting to know has more to do with the shedding of skins than anything else. In a world gone mad, Caravaggio has lost all control of his life, and, as the mutilation of his hands shows, even of his own body. If he can control all the pieces of information by forcing them into their proper places, he can convince himself he has regained some control over his own life. Truth gives him a sense of order and power; it is his defense against the loss of his own skin.

Hana’s defense against the loss of her skin is somewhat different. As in Coming Through Slaughter, mirrors in The English Patient symbolize identity. However, in The English Patient the crisis of identity causes Hana, at least, to avoid mirrors rather than seek them. By the time she reaches the villa, she has “refused to look at herself for more than a year” (52). When she first sees the English patient, she responds to something like her own lack of identity in him: “A man with no face. An ebony pool. All identification consumed in a fire. [. . .] There was nothing to recognize in him” (48). Later she notes that “[a] man not of your own blood can break upon your emotions more than someone of your own blood. As if falling into the arms of a stranger you discover the mirror of your choice” (90).
A sudden interest in his or her own reflection indicates a perceived change in identity. The English patient claims, “When we are young we do not look into mirrors. It is when we are old, concerned with our name, or legend” (141). He, himself, becomes curious about his own face after he has been “disassembled” by Katharine (155). When examining the change in his face caused by the bruise to the eye she gives him he realizes he has “not looked at himself like this in a mirror for years” (153). Again after he has been burned, he asks for a mirror (100). Hana only looks at herself again after she has made the decision to remain at the villa. This is the first choice she has made about her life since cutting her hair. She “peer[s] into her look, trying to recognize herself” (52).

Kip, on the other hand, “has no mirrors” (219). He is an outsider, by nature an observer standing on the edge, and among the westerners this role is accentuated. His lack of mirrors suggests his inability to find any reflection of himself in this society. For him the stories are a way in. He is trying to understand a culture completely alien to his own. Lord Suffolk is his first teacher:

From the back seat Lord Suffolk chatted about the migration of robins from the war zones of Europe, the history of bomb disposal, Devon cream. He was introducing the customs of England to the young Sikh as if it was a recently discovered culture. (184)

At times Kip allows himself to believe it is a culture which he can be a part of, as during his apprenticeship with Lord Suffolk:

Kirpal Singh had been befriended, and he would never forget it. [. . .] So he had won passage, free of the
chaotic machinery of the war. He stepped into a family after a year abroad, as if he were the prodigal returned, offered a chair at the table, embraced with conversations.

(187-189)

Many of the stories reveal both the similarities and differences of the two cultures, as does the one of the bride shot in the church. Lord Suffolk finds it horrible: To Singh it sounded like a familiar Indian fable" (185).

There are other instances of Kip using stories to orient himself. When Caravaggio becomes talkative at Hana’s birthday party, he asks “for other stories about Toronto” in an effort to know Hana better (268). After the evacuation of Naples, he finds himself alone in the streets which are “unnerving mostly because of the silence. All they hear of the human world are barking dogs” (278). The city, a monument to human civilization, has lost all civilizing elements. Kip finds comfort in a church with giant human figures on the walls where “he walks within the discussion of these creatures that represent some fable about mankind and heaven” (279). Kip’s faith in civilization is restored by the mere suggestion of human stories.

The relationship he had with Lord Suffolk is the same type Kip establishes with the English patient even though “[i]t meant having to listen to the patient talk in his circuitous way, and the young soldier was not used to remaining still and silent” (89). Nonetheless, he continues to seek out the Englishman’s company:

He did not yet have a faith in books. In recent days, Hana had watched him sitting beside The English patient, and it
seemed to her a reversal of Kim. The young student was now Indian, the wise old teacher was English. (111)

There is a suggestion that his faith in books will come, but there is little doubt that his faith in words is already strong. He realizes that "he is a man from Asia who has in these last years of war assumed English fathers, following their codes like a dutiful son" (217).

His faith in words lasts until the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then he turns on them all:

I sat at the foot of this bed and listened to you, Uncle. These last months. When I was a kid I did that, the same thing. I believed I could fill myself up with what older people taught me. I believed I could carry that knowledge, slowly altering it, but in any case passing it beyond me to another. (283)

He has come to realize that there are two truths involved in this story: one for Europe and one for Asia. He understands suddenly that, while all the stories he has been absorbing may be true for his white friends, "[a]ll those speeches of civilization from kings and queens and presidents... such voices of abstract order" do not include him (285). No matter how long he listens, he will always be outside those stories.

This fact is overshadowed by his ability throughout the novel to step in and out of conversations as though he is not an essential element to them. Kip speaks to Hana of "the overlooked space open to those of us with a silent life" (200). Although he definitely makes skilled use of personal silence, there is more involved in his
"silent life." There is an element of enforced silence at work here. Not only is he on the outside of western stories, but the west provides no audience for his own. His existence in the margin as well as the self-sufficiency it allows him puts Kip in the company of Bellocq. The main difference between the two is that Kip is seeking the stories of the others while Bellocq seeks to remain anonymous within his silence.

The high degree of intertextuality found in The English Patient serves a specific purpose. While Bolden’s multitude of stories are all straight off the street, The English Patient pays lip service to the literary canon. However, rather than setting these works up with any sort of authority, this novel presents them with all their gaps and silences intact. The gaps and silences are, indeed emphasized by the habits of the readers. This is best seen in The English Patient’s use of his copy of The Histories. The author states his purpose clearly: “I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that the time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being” (240). He has no doubt that he is laying out the “truth” for all time. Despite the importance the English patient attaches to this book, he “has added to [it], cutting and gluing in pages from other books or writing in his own observations” until it is twice its original size (240). In the end, he has obliterated large parts of Herodotus’ history with his own. Hana practices the same activity, except she writes her notes only in the blank spaces of whatever book she is reading. In this way the books are never closed stories. They are always open to other versions.
Conclusion

The postmodern concern that is most conspicuously present in both of these novels is that of the impossibility of having just one version of a story—"true" story. With *Coming Through Slaughter* the message is so blatant that one might suspect Ondaatje of a little postmodern parody of his own. Just as silence can be taken too far, so can the concern with giving equal space to all stories. Bolden gives equal weight to all stories and all versions of a story to the point that every "stray fact" and "well-told lie" becomes a matter of great consequence. The stories themselves take on an absolute nature. Eventually he can only escape from the confusion of all those stories by retreating into absolute silence. The lesson to be learned is that one absolute is not better than the other. There is a suggestion that a middle ground is possible. Silence and stories should compliment rather than eradicate each other.

Many of the things hinted at in the first novel are stated much more strongly in *The English Patient*. Postmodern concerns and forms are still visible, although to a lesser degree. However, some of the postmodern questions are beginning to find answers. For instance, to the question of whether or not a "true" story is possible, Ondaatje's answer is, apparently, "True enough." Each of the characters in this novel tells numerous versions of his or her stories, and each version is a little different from its predecessors. Given time and space, this process eventually approaches something like the truth. Or it at least comes close enough to provide the teller with an understanding of his or her own experience.
There is, however, an even larger importance attached to the telling of stories in *The English Patient*. Seen as communal histories, the stories become both comforting and sinister. The postmodern notion of a story being the creation of a society like any building or factory is strong here. But Ondaatje takes the notion even farther. As literature is the product of a civilization, a civilization becomes the product of its literature. We are our stories.

The war has stripped these characters of all notions of civilization and left them in silence. Hana, Caravaggio, and the English patient are able to use books to re-establish their grasp of civilization and, therefore, are able to restructure their lives and identities. Seen this way, literature has a civilizing effect. Unfortunately, because literature is the product of a specific society, it is exclusive. Kip may be fascinated with western stories, but he cannot use them to rebuild his world. They offer him limited comfort because his story is different. More importantly, he will always be considered an outsider in the western stories.

In *The English Patient* the possibilities of silence are no longer a huge question. It seems taken for granted that those who take refuge in it will emerge when they are ready. Silence has become a healing place, a place to regroup. Silence has also become the space from which stories emerge. Hana writes in the silent spots in the books. The English patient waits for pauses in the reading to begin to talk.

The concern that no story be told "as though it were the only one" remains (epigraph *In the Skin of a Lion*). However, the overall
conclusion to be drawn here is that although there may be endless variations of any story, it does not follow that all variations are equal. Silence allows space for interpretation. While telling the story is important, respecting the silence is equally important. As the fate of Buddy Bolden shows, there must also be some form of editing, of protection from stories run rampant. There must also be a recognition of how stories behave: "Words, Caravaggio. They have a power" (234).
Nicole Brossard

Our Last Chance at Silence

"[J]e ne fais que porter mon nom dans la cité" (Le Sens apparent 16). Nicole Brossard’s much quoted statement in Le Sens apparent provides a good deal of insight into one of her major goals in writing. The implications of this statement are many, but for my proposes here, two are particularly important. First is implied that her name has been absent from the city and second that it is being brought from somewhere. Whereas many feminists are concerned with giving voice to the silenced stories of women, Brossard’s concern is more immediate. Her interest is more comparable to the pictures of the swimmers on the cave wall in The English Patient. Despite the fact that they have long been physically absent from the world, these people can never completely disappear as long as the drawings remain to bear witness to their existence. They have left their “mark on the wall.” The effect of the drawings is very similar to what Brossard is attempting through writing.

According to many feminists, women have been silenced by patriarchy. As France Théoret states, “Language is not neutral” (364). Women have been left outside of, indeed rendered invisible by, patriarchal language. Their names have not been present in the city. For Brossard the only remedy is to write herself into existence:

Je sais qu’écrire c’est se faire exister, c’est comme décider de ce qui existe et de ce qui n’existe pas, c’est comme décider de la réalité. [. . .] C’est en cherchant ses mots--et nulle part ailleurs que dans l’écriture cherche-t-
on autant ses mots — qu’une femme s’initie à l’image positive qui la fait exister comme sujet. (La Lettre aérienne 131-32, 136)

Louise Forsyth explains, “To write is to take one’s place as subject of self and text and to view the world from one’s own perspective” (“Nicole Brossard and the Emergence” 215). To Brossard the importance of telling the silenced stories of individual women pales beside the importance of making the “mark on the wall.” In order to make that mark, the tools must be modified. Give women the means and they will tell their own stories.

As might be expected from this, her project is much more collective than individual. One woman writing is not enough. There must be women writing. Brossard says, “[J]e ne crois pas que l’on puisse être une femme rebelle sans la solidarité des autres femmes” (Koski, Kell, Forsyth 110). Brossard has been instrumental in establishing, as Lianne Moyes points out, “a network of women who read, publish, promote, and review women’s writing” (210). She has been successful to the point that Louise Dupré claims, “[I]f one really reads Quebecois poetry in the feminine, one realizes it is a collective enterprise” (360). Dupré also states clearly that the high degree of intertextuality in the work of Québécois writers “does not however indicate any withdrawal into a Quebecois culture. Quite the contrary. Women of other nationalities, other ages, other disciplines are frequently invoked” (357).

Lianne Moyes takes this notion a step farther in her study of Brossard’s use of Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein in Picture Theory:

Brossard’s references to Barnes and Stein are not mere
allusions, not simply references back to an earlier moment in literary history; rather, her references establish a network of relationships among the texts of women from different historical moments. [. . .] Although the texts of Barnes and Stein provide valuable literary precedents for women writers, they are not stable sources; that is, they are not foundations on which Brossard can build. Rather, as I will argue, they are texts Brossard reads and re-writes— not in order to claim them as her own—but in order to insist upon their production and reception as a collaborative project among women. (209)

While underlining the collective nature of Brossard’s project, Moyes describes how Brossard’s approach results in a text which “reads backwards at the same time that it reads forwards” (208). Intertextuality among feminists and lesbians becomes more than “mere allusion”; it becomes a form of open communication:

By troubling the notion that a text has an origin and an ultimate referent, intertextuality suggests that texts have no possibility of closure, no way of stopping the cross-border play of signification among them. (208)

A good deal of the plot of Le Désert mauve revolves around this notion.

Brossard and other practitioners of the nouvelle écriture are well known for their questioning and troubling of language. If patriarchal language excludes women, then that language must be challenged. As Louise Forsyth says, “elles écrivent pour dénoncer ce jeu idéologique et pour inventer de nouvelles formes, comme il faut le
faire si un changement profond va se produire" ("L'Écriture au féminin" 200). Much more than merely indulging in word games, feminists "cherchent leurs paroles comme elles cherchent leur réalité. Elles forgent consciemment un langage qui reflète fidèlement leur expérience" (201). With Brossard the search for a female voice has led to her theories of writing as a spiral and a hologram. She, in particular, has experimented with ways of upsetting the "natural" order of things. As Caroline Bayard says:

Syntax, grammar, lay-out, punctuation, spelling, omissions, all concur, to different degrees, to upset the rules and give us a provocative text, lashed by blanks and typographical variations, ambiguous hyphens, brackets and parentheses. (Bayard 21)

Although her later work is not quite as radical in form as her earlier work, Bayard points out that "she stylistically remains on the offensive" (21)

Although, as described in the introduction, postmodernism is regarded with suspicion by many feminists, many aspects of postmodernism can be identified in Brossard's work. While her questioning of authority and her form have roots in her own specific concerns, they coincide nicely with definitions of postmodernism. Perhaps most significant is her questioning and exploration of language. Her interest in how words effect or shape reality is very strong, especially in terms of how women fit or fail to fit into the reality created. Rather than attempting to overthrow one version and replace it with another, Brossard is attempting to open up possibilities. She is attempting to create spaces in language where
all versions—previously marginal versions in particular—can co-exist. Whereas a circle closes in on itself, a spiral does not. And there are spaces left between the rungs.

The two novels considered here, Le Désert mauve and Baroque d’aube, both display a concern with language and silence. Language, as a patriarchal creation, is credited—or blamed—for the creation of reality as we know it. Since women have been left outside language, they are also outside reality. Silence here represents a place where pure experience, unadulterated by words, is still possible. Both the sea and the desert are metaphors for this type of deep silence. In Le Désert mauve the possibility of balance is not considered. To be seen, to obtain any sort of power over one’s own life, requires a place inside language and reality. This place must be won even if silence must be sacrificed to do so. In Baroque d’aube, since ground has been gained, the battle for a place inside language is no longer to be waged at all costs. Silence is seen as equally important as language and its loss is to be avoided.
Le Désert mauve

While I do not wish to suggest a direct connection between Brossard and Ondaatje, a comparison of their work is useful here. The understanding of silence achieved through the course of Coming Through Slaughter and The English Patient, figuratively speaking, appears to be the starting ground of Le Désert mauve. Ondaatje’s characters are lured into explorations of the various aspects of silence; on the other hand, Brossard’s characters have already been there and are fighting their way out. There is a great acceptance in Le Désert mauve of the notion that all communication is a form of translation. In fact, the entire novel stands as testimony to this idea. The novel as a whole also exemplifies Brossard’s theories of a network of women writing.

There are three clearly identifiable types of silence at work here: silence of absence, enforced silence, and deep silence. Although enforced silence is not explicit in Le Désert mauve, an acknowledgement of this type of silence is a necessary backdrop to any understanding of the other two types. As stated previously, from a feminist viewpoint, silence has been imposed on women by patriarchy and patriarchal language. This type of silence shares at least one feature with the absolute silence found in Coming Through Slaughter. It is a trap in which there is a total loss of voice. The defining difference is that it is never chosen and never tempting. Although Brossard does not spend a great deal of time dwelling on the deeds of the past, it is important to recognize that the result of those deeds-
-enforced silence—is her point of departure.

A silence of absence—a situation in which a character important to the story is unable to speak for him or herself—is represented in Le Désert mauve by Laure Angstelle, the original author of the story. Maude, who undertakes the translation of Laure’s story, “avait fait quelques recherches mais aucune n’avait donné de résultat. Laure Angstelle était l’auteure d’un seul livre publié dans une petite ville de l’Arizona” (61). Her complete absence from the world is one of the major factors in Maude’s translation of her text. This type of silence will be examined more closely further on.

The third type of silence—deep—is dealt with most explicitly in the original version of Laure’s novel. This is the place of pure experience—a place prior to words, or as suggested in the introduction, a place which allows for other things to develop. There is some similarity to the benevolent silence in The English Patient. Deep silence has positive aspects. There is a sense that this is the only place an authentic voice can be found. In La Lettre aérienne Brossard writes:

Or il est advenu que ce corps-concept de l’Homme est parvenu à l’aide du langage, des religions, des mythologies, de l’art et de la science à réfléchir si fort dans la femme, qu’à voix haute, elle se prend pour un Homme, si fort qu’aucune n’a le temps de se reconnaître sinon qu’en silence. (115)

There is not, however, the easy coexistence of silence and language found in The English Patient. Undoubtedly because of enforced silence, there is no easy movement back and forth between silence and language.
Choosing to take one’s place in language requires a certain sacrifice for “les mots mêlent le silence et l’ardeur” (La Lettre aérienne 101). The greatest difference between deep and benevolent silence is in Brossard’s emphasis on the individual’s physical experience of the world. In The English Patient silence is used more as a place to reorganize one’s thoughts about the “real” world.

To Brossard this difference is just one more aspect of gender difference. Women, traditionally, have a closer connection to their physical experience of the world. Men, traditionally, are more attracted to the word. Since the word is power, men are able to relegate physical experience to the back seat. Brossard elaborates on this point in L’amèr:

Ma mère me regarde. Je touche (à) ma mère. C’est évident son corps, je la connais comme une sensation. Lui, pour le connaître, il me faut mes yeux. Il faut que je lui parle. Il ne se laisse pas toucher. Il attendra que je puisse parler pour s’intéresser à moi. [. . .] Je ne puis à la fois garder le contact physique avec ma mère et l’écouter lui en même temps. (31)

The child in this passage knows her mother instinctively, through her body. In order to know her father, she must approach him on his terms. She must assume a place inside language. And she must give up the physical experience of her mother in order to do so.

There is an interesting variation on this theme in Le Désert mauve seen through Mélanie’s mother and her mother’s friend, Lorna. Mélanie is fascinated by Lorna’s apparent illiteracy:

La présence de Lorna sera toujours liée dans ma mémoire à
mes premières années d’école et tout particulièrement à mon apprentissage de l’écriture et de la lecture. J’aimais lire mais je ne me souviens pas d’avoir lu autrement qu’en la présence de Lorna. (20)

Lorna is more closely associated with physical experience. She enjoys the fear of Mélanie’s mother when she dives “son corps musclé dans l’eau de la piscine” (24).

Mélanie’s mother, on the other hand, is more closely associated with language. When Mélanie begins to write, it is her mother’s approval she seeks: “Je harcelais ma mère pour qu’elle lise le peu que j’avais écrit. Mes fautes! Je voulais qu’elle corrige tout ça” (27). This tends to rob the mother of access to the direct sort of experience that Lorna enjoys. She is left susceptible to a slow diffuse fear (24). She is also, in at least one instance, aligned with men: “[E]lle défendait le désert comme un sentiment qui la rapprochait des hommes” (19).

Another area of both similarity and difference between Le Désert mauve and The English Patient is provided by the desert. In both novels there is a strong connection between the desert and silence. In Le Désert mauve darkness creates a third element in the relationship. Mélanie describes the desert as “si chaud, si noir, si blême, silence immense” (25). As Catherine Perry points out,

Mélanie, par exemple, s’assimile à la nuit, ce qui est attesté à la fois par la racine grecque de son nom, melanos, “noir”, et par son origine personnel, ce nom lui ayant été donné par sa mère lors d’une nuit d’amour: “Mélanie, mais la nuit” (p 21). (589)
Darkness, silence and their physical counterpart, the desert, all represent pre-linguistic space. Brossard’s desert, however, differs from Ondaatje’s in the same way that deep silence differs from personal silence. Almásy retreats to the desert to escape all traces of civilization. Mélanie, despite her frequent returns, is in the process of coming out of the desert, the darkness and the silence. It is notable that she begins to write in the desert and that “la conscience des mots” occurs during the night (26).

The struggle out of silence involves two distinct movements in Le Désert mauve: from experience to expression and from expression to repetition. Both movements are seen as forms of translation. Translator Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood states:

Toutes les femmes son bilingues. Nous ’possédons’ forcément la langue dominante, de fabrication masculine, puisqu’on nous la met dans la bouche [. . .] Et nous communiquons entre nous dans une langue qui passe par le corps pour se dire et pour s’écrire [. . .] Traduire nous est donc une activité familière. (203-04)

No matter how vivid the physical experience is, women have no authentic language with which to turn the experience into words. Using patriarchal language is the equivalent of using a second language. Brossard affirms this:

D’avoir fait en sorte, par la force du code et de la loi et par habitude ensuite, que chaque femme fasse sienne la substance sémantique patriarcale est la plus grande réussite du patriarcat. Mais cela n’a pourtant pas empêché que bien assimilée, mal assimilée ou non assimilée, cette
langue étrangère qui nous habite familièrement, nous la parlons toutes avec un accent. (La Lettre aérienne 90)

The first version of Mélanie's story deals directly with the problem of expressing individual experience. At fifteen, she is in the process of discovering life and words and the incongruity of the two. She feels her own existence rather than speaking it or reasoning it. In her own words, she is "quinze ans et le coeur à l'esprit qui s'émerveille" (25). The speed of the Meteor, the night, the desert creatures, and even fear all come to her at the level of the signified; there is no need for the signifier. Meaning in the desert has a sort of purity: "Mais je pouvais exister sans comparaison" (25). This alludes directly to the binary nature of language as deconstructed by post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida. An explanation of the binary structure of language by Terry Eagleton serves to further clarify the statement:

Thus, for male-dominated society, man is the founding principle and woman the excluded opposite of this; and as long as such a distinction is tightly held in place the whole system can function effectively. [. . .] But equally man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite, defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence. Woman is not just an other in the sense of something beyond his ken, but an other intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore as an essential reminder of what he is.
Unlike in the world of language where she exists only as a comparison, in the desert Mélanie exists in her own right—without comparison.

There she has direct contact not only with things but with emotions as well:

Ici dans le désert, la peur est précise. Jamais obstacle. La peur est réelle, n'a rien d'une angoisse. Elle est nécessaire comme une journée de travail bien accomplie. Elle est localisée, familière et n'inspire aucun fantasme. Ici, il n'y a que du vent, des épines, des serpents, des lycoses, des bêtes, des squelettes: la nature même du sol.

[... ] La peur précise est belle. (24)

In the desert there is a distinct, precise reason for fear; it is necessary for survival. The things that incite fear are clear and easily identified. There is, therefore, no reason to embellish the reaction with other reactions such as anguish. There is no obstacle between the cause of the emotion and the experience of it. Like Mélanie herself, the feeling exists without comparison. That precision of cause and effect is what she finds beautiful.

This type of fear is quite different from the type she feels at home, where "la peur est diffuse" (24). At the motel, the fear she encounters is not of a primary nature; she has no direct access to the source. She must deal with the emotion as it is translated by others, in this case her mother, who calls it "[u]ne peur blême, une peur lente" (24). It comes to Mélanie from many levels at once. Such a fear is vague; it has no specific purpose and, therefore, requires explanation: "[M]a mère parlait souvent de la peur" (24). Attempting
to speak about it removes the emotion that much further from its cause and any hope of precision.

This precision represents a directness of meaning that Mélanie must return to the desert over and over again to find. The vast emptiness of the desert is contrasted to the clutter of the motel—the natural is opposed to the man-made. The open space of the desert offers a clarity that she cannot obtain at home. There, in the desert, she can believe in certitudes. She speaks of her certainty in the same passage in which she declares her ability to exist without comparison:


(26)

It is notable that her fear of words is slow like her mother’s fear, suggesting that the words do not have the precision or certitude of her experiences in the desert. There is a vagueness in words that causes her pain in speaking and in hearing. This is probably the same sort of confusion she feels at the motel—a confusion that sends her speeding through the desert. Words, conventionally, belong in the realm of the man-made. Nonetheless, her sudden need to express these experiences overcomes her fear. She is able to exorcise her fear by writing furiously: “La peur s’en va, la peur dévale” (26).

Also in the realm of the man-made is reality. In the context of much of Brossard’s work, reality is treated as a construction of language. As such it is in opposition to the precision and certainty of the desert: “Il n’y a pas d’ombre la nuit, à midi, il n’y a que
certitude qui traverse la réalité” (14). In short, reality is in opposition to direct experience: “La beauté est avant la réalité. [. . . ] J’avais quinze ans et je regardais la réalité empiéter sur les êtres comme une distorsion tragique de la beauté” (36). Reality, here and in other places in the text, is a thing imposed on humanity and it becomes a “petit piège” (14). A person who does not exist within reality does not exist at all—at least not in the view of patriarchal civilization. The reality that encompasses civilization is created by words. After she begins to write, Mélanie thinks:

Je connais la réalité. Je connais l’humanité si soudainement comme une ombre dans mes yeux. [. . . ] Depuis que j’avais écrit dans le carnet d’entretien, je voyais vraiment la réalité de près. (27)

With her new knowledge comes the realization that “les mots peuvent réduire la réalité jusqu’en sa plus petite unité: l’évidence” (32). Words become the equivalent of a child’s building blocks. Reality can be built, taken down, and rebuilt: “La réalité avait un sens, mais lequel?” (28).

The possibility of rebuilding reality is Le Désert mauve’s, and perhaps Brossard’s, greatest message of hope. Mélanie explains:

Oui, j’étais fascinée par la réalité et plus précisément par sa dimension impossible. La réalité n’est toujours que le possible accompli et c’est en quoi elle fascine comme un désastre ou offense le désir qui voudrait que tout existe en sa dimension. Je n’étais qu’une forme désirante dans le contour de l’aura qui entourait l’humanité. La réalité est un devenir espacé dans la mémoire. Il faut l’y surprendre
comme une forme essentielle. (37)
The impossible dimension of reality coincides with Wittgenstein’s notion of what can and cannot be said. For Wittgenstein abstract concepts could not be adequately defined by language and should, therefore, be left in silence. From a feminist viewpoint reality has been created by patriarchal language. Historically, the entirety of women’s inner experience has been left in silence—the impossible dimension. Reality has been the realization of the possible—that which can be expressed by language.

The narrator continues in the same vein:

Il me fallait un corps devant l’impensable et ce corps je le produirais, omniprésente à l’aube, les nuits d’orage écartant la foudre. Ce corps, je le filtrerais de l’ignorance, du savoir et de l’impensable qui l’accablaient. Ce corps serait une équation de vie à même l’impossible réalité. (37)

The use of the word equation here is interesting, since equations are so clearly connected to l’homme long and are not, in that context, given a very positive spin. She seems to be appropriating the term for her own purposes. Also of interest is the mention of desire in the first passage. Brossard’s frequent and varying uses of the word in this and other works give it added importance here. It joins the many things placed at risk by words, equations and reality. Mélanie, nonetheless, dedicates her being to making reality out of the impossible. She clearly believes that reality can be reshaped, pushed in another direction: “J’avais quinze ans et de toutes mes forces j’appuyais sur mes pensées pour qu’elles penchent la réalité du côté
de la lumière" (14).

The fact that there is a choice to be made is illustrated by the change in tense between the first mention of beauty and reality and the second: "La beauté était avant la réalité et la réalité était dans l'écriture, un jour" (40). Mélanie is fully aware of the consequences of her choice:

J'ai perdu le désert. J'ai perdu le désert dans la nuit de l'écriture. Il y a toujours une première fois, une première nuit qui brouille les passions, qui confond notre sens de l'orientation. (32)

In her effort to communicate her experience, she has lost something of the purity and certainty of her connection with the events, surroundings, and emotions. The night of writing may be the literal night she begins to write, but is more likely figurative of a darkness surrounding the activity. She is satisfying "mon désir de l'aube, mon besoin de l'aube" by writing her way out of darkness, towards the light.

*L'homme long* represents the result of becoming entrapped within the equations. He has complete faith that words serve his version of reality. He is unable to see the ways in which reality is created. For him, reality is a concrete and unchangeable phenomenon. And there is adequate proof of its existence: "Une photo est une preuve éclatante. La réalité n'est plus dans la tête de l'homme long. La réalité est sur la photo" (43). Reality is at its highest and most dangerous form in his equations: "[I]l savait qu'il ne pourrait pas survivre à la beauté des équations" (35). To organize his mind, he recites poetry in Sanskrit, not for the meaning of the words but for the discipline
required to remember them. Unlike Mélanie, there is no possibility of *l’homme long* attempting to lean either reality or words towards the light for “l’aurore était partout explosée dans son cerveau” (35).

It would seem that, although men are not portrayed with any great sympathy, they too can be victims of patriarchal society. While the existing form of reality works passing well for the patriarchal whole, it makes no room for the individual who does not meet the standard. *L’homme long* is a misfit. Despite the rigid control he imposes on himself through the equations, he is unable to escape the knowledge that physically he does not measure up:

*L’homme long aurait voulu son corps musclé. Il aurait aimé toucher cet autre corps, caresser le torse puissant, les cuisses, les fesses dures. Il se serait senti allégé du fardeau des chiffres et son dos courbé se fût redressé prêt à tous les combats.* (39)

His inability to accept his own physical nature has caused him to retreat into the equations, but he is left frustrated by this solution. There can be no reconciliation between what reality tells him he should be and what he knows he is. When the two sides of his existence inevitably clash, there is an explosion.

There is a good deal of evidence that an explosion takes place outside *l’homme long’s* head, also. There are the pictures, and the fact that he feels “prêt à rencontrer les autorités” (47). However, it is the ones that take place inside his head that make him dangerous. These explosions are connected to both his violence and his sexuality. Or, perhaps more accurately, the three are interconnected. He spends the first night at the motel thinking about it: "Il pense à
l’explosion, il pense à ça et rien n’arrive dans sa tête” (17). This situation is righted with a magazine:


The consequent series of explosions in his mind is followed by an icy sense of calm:

Ce calme semblait vouloir s’étendre partout en lui mais, au fur et à mesure qu’il le sentait s’emparer de tous ses membres, il éprouvait en contrepartie une excitation froide, mentale qui rendait intolérable chaque nerf dans son corps calme. (41)

While the explosion calms his body for the moment, it clears the way for the next explosion. The next day he “reprendrait sa fière allure, son charme” (47). On the way out of the motel room, he catches sight of “son corps disgracieux dans la glace” and on this night Angela Parkins is murdered (47).

It is notable that l’homme long is not the only character to suffer explosions in his head. Just as they are with l’homme long, the explosions experienced by others are caused by the clash between certainty of pure experience and reality, and they are preceded by a crisis of words. Driving through the desert, Mélanie has time to lament its loss—“J’ai perdu la désert”—and “creuser les mots” when she thinks, “Il ne faut pas qu’Albuquerque explode dans ma tête” (32). Angela Parkins says that “dans la détresse tout est envahi par le son
des mots et qu'alors tout devient impossible à comprendre, elle dit que ça explode dans sa tête” (50). And finally the narrator comments on Maude Laures' struggle to translate the book:

Dans son sommeil, Maude Laures se range du côté de la perception, attachée cependant par quelques cordes sensible à l'expression qu'elle définit comme étant une substantielle proposition capable de faire pencher la balance. [...] Un mois fragile explosé dans la tête de Maude Laures. (62)

The difference between these explosions and those of l'homme long is that the three women realize “que les mots ne sont pourtant que des mots” (26). They are not trapped by the equations.

The second movement of the novel, from expression to repetition, takes place when Maude Laures decides to translate the book. Since the text does not change from one language to another but does change significantly, traditional concepts do not apply. Catherine Perry offers the following explanation:

Il faut donc envisager la possibilité d'une coexistence de plusieurs langues au sein d'une seule. Selon un point de vue féministe, chaque femme possède sa propre langue, un mode d'expression unique à elle seule comme l'est son expérience. (590)

This is in complete opposition to Wittgenstein’s notion that there can be no completely individual language. In the same way that Mélanie experiences the desert and must translate it into her own words, Maude experiences the text and translates it into her own words. Since this translation is not just person to person but woman to woman, this
expands on the previously mentioned theory that all women are bilingual. In order to understand and be understood they must be multilingual.

Maude's decision also introduces a silence of absence—that of the original author. This absence allows Maude a great deal of liberty with the text, for who is to contradict her? At the same time, however, it demands a certain responsibility, since the existence of the original cannot be denied. Maude's reaction to the results of her search for the author, Laure, is indicative of the freedom of interpretation that is hers. When research turns up little evidence of Laure's life, she thinks:

Cela la rassurait de savoir qu'elle était libre de tout (imaginer) à son sujet. [.. .] Elle pouvait l'imaginer jeune ou âgée, libre et fière, ayant peut-être connu un grand amour ou un désastre, ayant été géomètre ou physicienne, vivant encore isolée quelque part entre Globe et Gila. Ou morte, telle était l'autre perspective. (61)

The silence of the author leaves Maude recourse to no authority but her own and perhaps that of the text itself. Her knowledge can move backwards only as far as the text and then forwards from there. From the moment her knowledge begins to move forward, it begins to change. This change is the process of interpretation and translation—the process of Maude making the story her own and sending it out in a new form.

The first and most notable change is that Laure becomes a character in Maude's version, or rather in Maude's own story; Laure does not actually appear in Mauve, l'horizon. Maude drags Laure from
her silence and deposits her firmly within "reality." Her first appearance is speculative, worded carefully: "Il est impossible de dire avec précision [. . .]. Cela on peut l’imaginer [. . .]. On peut aussi penser [. . .]. On peut croire aussi [. . .]." (87-88). Only small parts of her description, such as the colour of her eyes, are given as fact. Also stated with certainty are several of Laure’s personal opinions. For instance, the narrator says, "[I]l lui fallait du silence, mettre du silence devant les êtres comme un écran car elle savait que la beauté était au prix du silence qui accordait toutes les musiques" (88). This leaves the reader on ambiguous ground. The first impulse is to apply the new information to the story just read. But we must remember that what we are now reading is not Laure’s opinion. It is Maude imagining Laure’s opinion. Laure’s second appearance is far less speculative, and she is enticed into a conversation with Maude. What the reader is being presented with is the process of Maude experiencing the text and translating it into her own terms. All the settings and characters of the novel receive the same treatment.

The differences between the first and second versions of the novel are quite drastic. They begin with different titles and finish with different endings. Of the fear Mélanie finds exhilarating, Maude says, "La peur est pour toute femme un signal de repliement" (162). It is not clear whether this is because Maude is twice removed from the experience, so to speak, or simply because of a personality difference. It is clear, however, that Maude’s experience of fear is vastly different from Mélanie’s. Again, Maude’s experience of the death of Angela causes her to try to interpret the end of the story a little more hopefully. All in all, it is not the details of how the
novel has changed that are important so much as the fact that it has changed. In the sort of theory mentioned by Perry that allows for the individual language of each person, there can be no right or wrong interpretation. Maude’s version of the text is just as valuable as Laure’s. The novel as a whole becomes a demonstration of writing as a collective effort. It also demonstrates the possibility of literature moving backwards and forwards.

In terms of silence, Brossard’s stand is quite clear. The positive aspects of deep silence, represented by Mélanie’s experiences in the desert, can be very tempting. Especially in the face of the chaos of “reality” and words there is “une volonté de silence” (92). But women cannot afford the luxury of retreating from the chaos. Mélanie must overcome the temptation: “J’étais maintenant entrée dans la peur de l’indicable, dans la fureur des mots sans le vouloir j’abdiquais devant le silence” (30). Abdication implies relinquishing power. Words have the power to create “reality” and “reality” is what we all have to live with. If women are to take their place in reality, silence is not a viable option.
Baroque d’aube

Although the desert has been exchanged for the sea, the stance taken towards language, reality and silence in Baroque d’aube is very similar to that taken in Le Desert mauve. Words compromise the possibility of direct experience but are a necessary evil if women are to have a part in “reality.” However, the movement out of silence into language chronicled in Le Desert mauve would appear to be a fait accompli in Baroque d’aube. Whether or not women are able to assume a position in language is no longer the question. The question now is, having gained such a hard-won position, what is being done with it. In response to this issue, Baroque d’aube examines the power, uses and abuses of language as exercised by both genders.

More specifically, it examines the process of creating fiction/reality and how they affect our perception of the world around us. The underlying assumption of this novel is that the choice between silence and language has been made, and women can now afford a more benevolent view of silence. Access to the positive aspects of deep silence that women denied themselves in Le Désert mauve is now a possibility. Silence begins to take shape as the only viable alternative to the chaos created by language. Indeed, the concern now is that, in the midst of the noise and confusion into which language can deteriorate, we are losing the ability to hear the silence. As with most struggles, the perception of gaining ground brings with
it a danger of becoming complacent. This potential problem has not escaped Brossard's notice. Despite a slight shift in approach from earlier work to this novel, the fundamental theme of Brossard's work is still highly visible. To strengthen the impact of her position, she becomes a character in her own novel. The character--Brossard--states,

... parce que nous sommes exilées de nous-mêmes dans la langue et l'imaginaire de nos cultures respectives, nous ne pouvons pas faire un usage naïf de ces outils indispensable à la conscience de soi et du monde. Dans une certaine mesure, nous sommes condamnées à élucider l'insoutenable posture qui est la nôtre au milieu des images qui reflètent notre exclusion, notre fragmentation, au milieu des contradictions qui ne sont pas nôtres, mais dont nous faisons les frais et qui nous plongent dans l'ambivalence, la double contrainte, la culpabilité, le doute, l'autocensure. Inutile de prendre la parole pour renforcer les paysages du statu quo. C'est par la fiction de l'Homme que nous sommes devenues fictives, sortons de la fiction par la fiction. Nous existerons dans le récit que nous inventerons. (125-6)

The importance of women taking their place in the world through writing is still as strong as ever. So much so that Brossard felt it necessary to make a "personal appearance" in her text to state her case clearly. Other reasons for inserting her own name in her fiction will be discussed later. The tense of the final sentence in
this quotation is worthy of note. There is nothing tentative about “We will exist.” Although the goal is still in the future, the positive nature of this statement reflects the overall tone of the novel.

Whereas in Le Désert mauve the connection between language, fiction and reality was assumed to the point that fiction and reality were more or less synonymous, Baroque d’aube goes much farther in defining the connections among them and the process by which one becomes the other. In a rather lengthy passage that sums up these connections, the narrator refers to a time when “[i]maginer donnait à la vie un autre tournant qui laissait supposer que la vie avait un sens” (42). The implications of the statement are twofold: Any meaning we may have assigned to our lives was fictional and fiction is no longer capable of assigning meaning. Again the tense of the passage is important. There is an implication that since we now know how fiction behaves, it has lost some of its power. Much of Baroque d’aube is dedicated to exposing the devious behaviour of fiction.

In the postmodern era, history is one of many meta-narratives whose ability to give life meaning has come under scrutiny. In an elaboration of how fiction becomes reality, the narrator describes how history has developed:

Chaque altercation engendrait de nouveaux mots, forçait le sens comme on tord un poignet. La détermination augmentait. Alors l’alter ego entrait dans le sens. L’alter altérait la valeur des signes et l’ego
recommençait tout de go. Maquillage, tatouage, perçage et débordement de sens se succédaient. La vie trébuchait sur les valeurs nouvelles. Se relevait, l’horizon collé au front comme un écran. Les générations se succédaient. La vie donnait au corps des munitions pour la vie. Le futur avalait. La mort, elle, faisait comme prévu. Déchiffrer, murmurait Cybil. Déchiffrer, calculer les chances de vie au milieu des signes. (43)

All of this also provides a detailed background to the previously mentioned statements by the character Brossard. That which we consider the history of humanity is merely fiction piled upon fiction. And the overwhelming majority of the fiction is a patriarchal creation.

In the same way that the histories of the world have created a collective reality, a person’s own stories make up his or her individual reality. As la Sixtine tells Cybil, “Avouez-le: personne n’existe en dehors de son récit” (28). Whereas the personal histories of many of the characters in Le Désert mauve were carefully concealed, the pages of Baroque d’aube are littered with such stories. The reader is even given the background of minor characters such as the Demers brothers, and their fixation with their mother (166-67). From the beginning when la Sixtine asks, “Voulez-vous que je vous interprète ma vie?” (28) to the end when Occident, on the last night of her life, tells her own story, each character is driven to offer some explanation for how he or she has arrived at this moment.
While telling one's story may seem harmless, the act as presented here is less than benevolent. At its worst it is actually a form of assault which varies in intensity. At the milder end of this scale, the words of one person merely overwhelm another as happens when Irène and a male friend comfort each other by sharing stories of their grief:

Deux mois s'écoulèrent ainsi à dialoguer quotidiennement. L'ami commença alors à deviser à propos de son travail et de ses recherches. Avec le temps, ses paroles se transformèrent en de longs monologues qu'il m'était de plus en plus difficile d'interrompre par une question, une remarque, une opinion. Chaque fois que j'ouvrais la bouche, ses mots avaient tôt fait d'engloutir les miens comme les sables mouvants avelent cailloux et projectiles ou quiconque s'y aventure. (91-92)

This behaviour on the part of a friend is an inconsiderate appropriation of all the available language in a space, but it is not malicious. The character is driven by a need to speak and not a desire to dominate the other person. Not all exchanges in this novel are as innocent.

At the most severe end of the scale a person can be dragged into the story of another and held hostage there. An assault of this nature takes place when Cybil finds herself left alone with fellow dinner guest James Warland. The conversation seems innocent enough until she finds herself actively involved in his story:

Maintenant vous descendez le Mékong. L'homme t'entraîne
au bout du monde. Il tapisse l'espace de descriptions fines. Vous visitez des palais, des ruines au milieu de la jungle qui envahit les bras et les visages de déesses langoureuses et maléfiques. (116)

She is dragged from war zone to war zone fighting to "[s]e calmer" and "ne pas pleurer" because "les corps sont passés tout près de [elle]" (117-18). The aftermath of "[l]e délire de l'homme" leaves her "plongée dans un mutisme sans égal" (118).

Even when the stories do not constitute an assault, there is a certain element of danger involved. There is a sense that giving one's story to another means losing control of it. The story literally becomes the property of the other. For this reason, although la Sixtine is eager for an exchange, Cybil refuses to tell la Sixtine her story. When Cybil asks what she would do with her story, la Sixtine freely admits, "Je la transformerais" (27). The debate that ensues is more like two sides of the same coin than two opposing positions. Cybil takes the familiar stand that words confuse experience: "Il faut plus qu'une histoire pour comprendre les êtres" (28). La Sixtine maintains that she only wants to be a part of "ce qui en l'autre est source de mémoire et de rêve" (28). In essence, both agree on the consequences of sharing each others stories but where one would avoid those consequences, the other would embrace them. Cybil concedes, "La soif constante que nous avons du récit de l'autre c'est un peu notre odorat. Sentir l'autre. Comparer. Ne jamais se sentir seule" (28). This brings to mind the scene in The English Patient in which Hana is trying to sniff out
Carravagio. She, however, has reason to believe she can.

The possibility of being able to sniff out a person is treated with suspicion in Baroque d’aube. As noted, there is a sharp difference between knowing a person’s story and knowing a person (28). Cybil’s theory is that one can only genuinely know another (pure experience) if language (names and stories) is avoided. Genuine knowledge requires deep silence of the sort defined by Dauenhaur, which leaves space for other types of experience. This is why she attempts to have anonymous encounters with strange women. The moment language enters, fiction takes over. The narrator claims that knowing a person’s past, “même en l’imaginant, c’est lui voler son présent” (62). The real person fades into the background and a character is born. The exploration of this process is an important theme in this novel.

The steps of the dance Brossard has been doing back and forth across the lines between language, fiction and reality become even more intricate when the creation of characters is thrown into the mix. If language creates fiction which, in turn, creates reality, it stands to reason that characters also take their place in reality. There is little doubt that fictional characters can occupy as large a place in a person’s mind as real people:

De certains personnages je parle encore parce que, de passage dans nos vies, ces êtres de chair fictive jouent, pour une phrase, une image ou une sensation de déjà vu, un rôle de premier plan. (76)

This is illustrated by the repeated appearances of characters such
as the Hyde Park woman, who acts as a muse to Cybil. Or she is, perhaps, even a younger, more idealistic version of the writer. Who she may be is not as important as the fact that she continues to be a positive factor in Cybil’s life.

In a larger perspective, there is a great deal of power involved in the creation of a character: “La naissance d’un personnage transforme la lumière du matin, l’insère dans un grand tout d’énergie ludique” (227). Indeed, a character “ébranle les convictions, déplace la solitude, permet de renouer avec les ancêtres et les survivantes du règne d’homme” (112). All of this calls for a certain amount of awareness and a sense of responsibility because “le personnage n’est jamais de passage. Quoique libre de l’abandonner quand bon lui semble, qui invente autrui sait que c’est toujours devant soi” (227). Like any written work, once created, the character takes on a life of its own. The creator has no control over how that character interacts with the rest of the world.

All of this seems more or less benevolent, but like the telling of stories, the creation of characters also has a more sinister side. While at one point Cybil speculates that perhaps “ceux et celles qui nous entourent aient un lien avec les personnages que nous créons” (215), for the most part she is quite aware of how people can be turned into characters. This is so much so that even while she is protesting that she wants only an anonymous encounter with the young woman at Hotel Rafale, she gives La Sixtine a fictitious name. She has, from the start, every intention of turning
the person into a character. Proof that she is aware of the implications of her actions is provided when she later muses: "[I]l ne fallait pas transformer Irène en personnage. Elle perdrait alors tout son pouvoir de vie et de création. Irène devait rester vivante, charnelle, accessible" (159).

As for La Sixtine, the real person fades into the silence, and Cybil begins a relationship with the character. Although the La Sixtine character, at this point, exists only in Cybil's consciousness, she is already developing a certain independence. Sometimes Cybil "laissa la Sixtine et son histoire de vie venir vers elle" (134) or she willingly "fai[t] venir l'image de la Sixtine" (198). But at other times, she appears unbidden: "La Sixtine vint s'asseoir au pied du lit" (68) or "Déplacée dans l'espace et le temps, la Sixtine apparut" (152). Once the novel is published, the character will be free to represent the person on whom the character is based out in the real world in ways over which the person has no control. Making a character out of a person takes something from the original. In a sense the original has been, for all intents and purposes, silenced.

On the other hand, the reverse happens when Cybil slips and tells La Sixtine her name:

En donnant son nom à la femme de l'hôtel Rafale, Cybil sait qu'elle a commis une faute de jugement qui risque de la compromettre, de la priver des licences, des rôles et des délires d'écriture permettant d'aller librement au-devant de l'imagination. Cybil Noland, personnage,
This is a problem that plagues the writer for the rest of the novel. Perhaps because the creation is inadvertent, Cybil has less control over the character Cybil than she does over the character la Sixtine. The character Cybil appears unsummoned, and her appearance is always troubling. After one appearance Cybil realizes, "Il n'y aura donc pas de répit au questionnement. Il faudra faire parler cette femme" (62). She later resolves: "Cybil écrira toute la nuit, la tête appuyée sur les pensées de Cybil Noland. La faire parler" (73). Her desire to glean information from a character based on herself emphasizes the notion that, once created, a character becomes an independent entity.

Another aspect of the situation that Cybil finds perplexing has to do with the meaning of throwing one's own name into a work. Rather than being reassured by the discovery that other authors such as Audrey Thomas and Timothy Findley had done the same, Cybil is moved to wonder:

D'où venait donc ce besoin contemporain d'aller là, en pleine fiction, se faire voir et participer à l'action? Fallait-il s'offrir en garantie au cas où ça tournerait mal dans le récit? [. . .] Était-ce là nouvelle méthode de refouler la fiction aux limites du probablement vrai? (102)

In some ways, this practice repudiates Preston's theory of the silence of both author and novel by the physical separation of the two. In a mirror gesture, the character Nicole Brossard appears for
the first time in the passage immediately following the first appearance of the Cybil character. A quick response would be to note that the existence of the character "Brossard" removes any possibility of confusing the author Brossard with the protagonist of the novel, the writer Cybil—a tempting mistake with a theoretical work of this nature. More strikingly, however, her appearance tends to accentuate the preceding events and lend a certain "authority" to the fiction. Despite the speculation that the very postmodern practice drives fiction back within its own boundaries, in this case the very thin line between fiction and reality becomes even thinner. The question is never actually resolved to Cybil's satisfaction. She finally concedes to not knowing "ce qu'il adviendra de Cybil Noland, personnage" (198).

Therefore, Cybil does not compound the error of giving her name by relenting to la Sixtine's request for a story. Later at a concert while "le plaisir des sens" causes her to enjoy a feeling that is "présent, réel, très physique" she reflects, "C'est parce que je suis heureuse que j'ai refusé à la Sixtine une histoire" (45). This sort of happiness requires an ability to maintain a certain amount of personal silence. She is reluctant to let words clutter the experience of the moment. Two strangers can meet without the "récit que chacune porte en elle. Il y a là une économie de l'histoire au profit de la présence" (26). And presence "sert à la conscience. Elle permet de circuler dans le temps, de voler haut et bas et d'exercer cette merveilleuse faculté en nous qui est de produire du sens à partir de nos sens" (26-27). Strangely, she later tells
stories to the character she creates of La Sixtine (66-71).

The juxtaposition of the pure experience of the moment with the confusion of language is a repetition of the paradox illustrated by *Le Désert mauve*. However, in an interesting addition to the familiar theme, the narrator wonders:

Dans quel sens va le sens de la vie qui n’a pas de sens puisque le jour et la nuit sont ronds? Le sens était-il donc seulement dans la question comme un désir de déchiffrement devant les vies qui font progresser le récit du monde en ramifiant les gestes et les intentions?

(42)

The linear--language and meaning--are, therefore, placed in opposition to the cyclical--life. Our experience of life as cyclical has as evidence the occurrence of day and night, but our understanding of life has been shaped by language. The mention of day and night introduces into the formula various concepts of time. Since time can be seen as both cyclical and linear, it plays several roles in *Baroque d’aube*.

For the most part time, or more accurately our perception of time, occupies a position very close to fiction. For example, the narrator states, “Le futur nous enracine dans la fiction” (229). As long as we are certain enough of having a future to speculate about it, we are rooted in fiction, for even the best laid plans can be no more than speculation. The future is an “[o]jet insolite” (229). But this very quality presents endless possibilities much like those provided by fiction. Both excite and tempt the imagination: “Au
futur, la diversité d’autrui revient au même: le caractère effrayant de notre aptitude au voyage et au vertige des grands espaces et de la promiscuité” (229). However, the temptation of endless possibilities makes the future “une rumeur continue qui intoxique l’énergie du présent, nous tient constamment sur nos gardes” (229). It is too easy to lose sight of a mediocre present for a fascinating, albeit fictional, future. Once the rumour is planted in our minds, the pure experience of the present is poisoned.

This, too, hearkens back to Le Désert mauve in which characters must sacrifice direct connection with experience found in silence in order to take a place inside language. Given the fictional nature of past and future, it makes sense that the only direct experience possible is with the present. And in Baroque d’aube, as in Le Désert mauve, direct experience is equated with the physical and so, therefore, is the present: “Le présent est un corps. Le corps est vivant, pur présent” (23). Music also has the power of creating a physical sensation capable of tying a body to the present. At a concert the music of the tango causes “une indicible sensation de présent. Un fabuleux présent qui contient tous les plis de la douleur, de la solitude et du bonheur roulés au fond de toi” (121). As in Le Désert mauve, direct experience results in a feeling of well-being: “Dans cette ville, tu existes. Il n’y a de double en toi que l’énergie” (121). However, in Baroque d’aube the choice between experience and language is not quite so final. Although Cybil has definitely taken up a place inside language, a physical experience, the feeling of the wind, allows the character to hold “bien fort le
présent," suggesting the possibility of the best of both worlds (115).

At the same time that language causes time to seem simplistically linear, it also causes a good deal of temporal tension or even overlap. While the present is poisoned by the fiction of the future, "[i]l y a quelque chose de fascinant à vouloir exister au futur alors que toute la langue du passé nous éblouit, nous retient par le bas de l'imaginaire" (245). The play of the past and future on the present leads to "l'impression d'un double présent" which haunts the characters at various points throughout the novel (81). This "double" motif appears in several different forms. The narrator applies it to reality when Cybil and Jasmine discuss "la mort qui commence à partager la réalité en deux" (67). In another conversation Cybil says that Occident makes her feel "comme si la réalité se dédoublait" (86).

However, the statement that sheds the most light on the concept of double time is made directly after a page on which the only words are LA RÉALITÉ VIRTUELLE. This statement surrounded by the silence of the blank page drags our attention back to the idea that the reality created by words is, indeed, virtual. The next page clarifies the situation further: "La réalité se superposa à la réalité" (174). If Brossard's contention that reality is created by words is kept in mind, this statement does not seem so strange. It is merely a matter of one story or version of reality being laid on top of another. This also explains why almost every instance of the feeling of double time takes place during a conversation, usually a
conversation involving more than two people. The most notable example occurs during a meal on board the ship: "À peine Cybil est-elle entrée dans la salle à manger que la sensation du temps double s'installe en elle" (139). What ensues is "[l]a confusion [. . .]. La langue était comme une grande folle assoiffée de rêves" (141). During all this Cybil is painfully aware of her own reality and at the same time all the other realities being passed back and forth across the table.

During this incident, as at other times, language literally takes on a life of its own:

Au milieu des personnages, elle avalait, vite, goulûment. Elle buvait tout, petites et grandes histoires. Inassouvissable, elle soulevait la mince couche de solitude qui protège d'autrui, siphonnant tout ce qui ne s'écrit pas, ne se partage pas. [. . .] La langue tourbillonnait, ouragan fou, trombe d'eau. La langue avalait son propre déluge. (141)

In its rampage, language strips away the protective layer of personal silence of the characters in the room. The personification of language as a beast spinning out of control also embodies Brossard's concerns over women throwing themselves too completely into its clutches. Although Le Désert mauve advocates taking a place inside language at any cost, the message of Baroque d'aube is to proceed with caution. The rewards may be great, but there are dangers. Language as an entity can be "féroce" (142). Only when treated with enormous respect does it yield its treasures:
Il fallait beaucoup d’amour pour que la langue nous enivre sans nous plonger dans le chaos de délie dont le corps prétend n’être jamais assouvi. Il fallait assidûment la solliciter [. . .]. Elle ne pardonne pas si on l’écarte ou la désire distraitemment. (141-42)

Silence begins to seem like the last refuge from a world under the power of language.

In Baroque d’aube silence becomes a much more defined concept than it was in Le Désert mauve. There are three clearly identifiable types at work here: silence as entity, in which it takes on a life of its own; personal silence, which is more or less self-explanatory; and deep silence, which has dimensions and possibilities even greater than those of language.

In many ways the entity that language becomes acts as a foil for the entity that silence becomes. Both are personified in much the same way. Cybil experiences a silence “épouvantablement vivant” (18), so much so that it beckons her: “Le silence épelle son nom dans la chambre” (69). And as with language, it is possible to lose control of the beast: “Sixtine, le silence tourbillonne” (74).

However, the creature silence is, in all cases, more benevolent than the creature language. In a scene reminiscent of the one in Coming Through Slaughter in which silence is a beast circling the room,

[1]entement, le silence fait son apparition. Plus lentement encore, il fait son personnage. Alors, il capte toute l’attention, fait disparaître les meubles de la
chambre [. . .]. Le silence marche en tenant Cybil par la
main; il l’entraîne dans un espace à ciel ouvert où,
appuyés les uns contre les autres, des milliers de livres
reposent offerts à toutes les intempéries de la nature:
incunabules, elzévirs, atlas, livres de poche. Cité de
livres. (71)

Despite the similarities suggested by the personification of the two
concepts, language and silence are, in this context, at opposite
ends of the spectrum. Language takes shape to confuse an existing
situation. Silence, on the other hand, takes shape in order to lead
Cybil in the direction of clarity, much like the character who
"[r]approche parfois sa tête du silence" as though there is some
understanding to be found there (112).

The second type, personal silence, is undoubtedly the most
problematic from a Brossardian point of view. Although women have
free access to various degrees and uses of this type, there remains
a danger of being driven back into silence and trapped there.
Personal silence is easily transformed into enforced silence. At one
point, James Warland manages to do this to Cybil: "Dans l’auto, tu
ne dis mot. Le délire de l’homme t’a plongée dans un mutisme sans
egal" (118). Perhaps the most disturbing example of how men can
still use this type of silence against women is to be found in one
of the virtual reality programs of the Demers brothers. They
recreate their dead mother’s bedroom where they can go to watch how
"maman dort, maman se maquille, maman change de robe, maman regarde
par la fenêtre" (170). The only things the woman cannot do is leave
the room--and speak. When Cybil visits the room, she finds "[s]a bouche est pleine de murmures et de chuchotements comme pour bien s’assurer du passage des mots de l’œil à la bouche, puis au coeur. Quelque chose ne ve pas. Elle se mord la joue, se frotte les yeux [. . .]" (186-7).

However in a departure from Le Désert mauve, the fear of being victimized by this type of silence is no longer insurmountable. Despite the danger of being silenced, women can now retreat voluntarily into their own silence. Women’s ability to move from language to silence is demonstrated by a scene in which Irène is dominating the conversation. Just when Cybil has given up hope of stopping her, “voilà qu’elle expose fièrement son silence comme d’autres un argument. Le silence ondule, ruban de nostalgie, dans l’air conditionné du bar bruissant” (127). Since nostalgia involves the interpretation of past stories, the use of the word to describe silence implies that silence contains meaning equal to language. This implication is reinforced by the comparison of the use of silence to the use of an argument.

Perhaps because they no longer feel themselves in control of the situation, men now feel threatened by the silence of women. As the women gradually withdraw from the dinner-time conversations, the men become more and more uncomfortable:

Depuis quelques jours, Irène ne participait plus à la conversation [. . .]. Occident interrompait de moins en moins les hommes. Pour ma part, je m’enfermais dans un silence qui, au fur et à mesure que je m’y enfonçais,
ruinait en moi tout espoir de sociabilité. Thomas Lemieux n’aimait pas notre silence. Il y voyait complot, reproche, rejet, je ne sais quoi. (179)

Perhaps the example of the most self-serving use of personal silence takes place when Cybil stops talking in order to avoid having to tilt her head back when responding to an extremely tall friend (105).

This seemingly gratuitous incident immediately precedes their visit to Wittgenstein’s grave where “[l]es femmes se tenaient debout silencieuses comme des harpes oubliées au fond d’une boutique d’antiquaire” (106). The irony of two women standing in silence before this particular grave can only be intentional. Wittgenstein’s assertion that there are things which cannot be expressed by language takes on added meaning in this place. The tombstones all represent lives “avec ses dates de naissance, ses noms de baptême et d’épouses, ses riches et ses humbles, ses bouquets de fleurs, ses anges et ses allégories qui font peur” (63). A graveyard is a collection of an infinite number of stories, and yet all is enveloped in the most absolute silence possible. The silence of cemeteries is symbolic of the larger universal silence and is used as such at several points in this novel.

Deep silence is much the same in Baroque d’aube as it was in Le Désert mauve. Although it is no longer the only place where direct experience can be achieved, it is still the most likely place. While, as noted earlier, Cybil argues that it is impossible to know another person through language, she acknowledges the possibility of
doing so through silence. She reflects that the essence of another can be visible:

Mais pour cela, il fallait que la mer pénètre tout entière dans la bouche, que le vent lisse les cheveux au plus près du crâne, que le feu s’enflamme du feu, il fallait toucher tout de très près, à la vitesse du vivant, et attendre que la femme dispose de son propre silence [. . .]. Aussi quand le climatiseur s’était arrêté, Cybil Noland s’était-elle sentie spoliée du silence singulier qui l’avait rapprochée de la Sixtine.

(20)

She later affirms that “oui le silence rapproche” (257).

Despite representing basically the same concept as it does in Le Désert mauve, deep silence has evolved in Baroque d’aube. It is not simply the absence of language since “il y a des trous dans la langue qui ne sont pas de silence” (233). More importantly, there are strong implications that silence is capable of generating meaning of its own. For instance, the narrator wonders what the world would be like if we could “dans l’univers, répartir le silence en rubans d’égale portée,” thereby making it more accessible. Cybil speculates that “la diversité des esthétiques était maintenant telle qu’il fallait mettre des heures de silence et d’observation pour interpréter” (151). And then, of course, there is the previously quoted passage in which silence takes Cybil by the hand and leads her around. If allowed, meaning and understanding will come out of silence. It should be noted that any meaning that arises from

147
silence would be based on pure experience—unmitigated by words. The meaning that arises from language is entirely man-made.

The most striking aspect in the evolution of silence is its position in respect to language. In *Le Désert mauve* clinging to silence jeopardized one’s ability to take a place inside language. In *Baroque d’aube* clinging to language jeopardizes one’s ability to take a place inside silence. In the first novel, the positive aspects of silence were acknowledged but considered expendable, albeit regrettfully. The second novel takes a closer look at the positive aspects and question the wisdom of sacrificing them. The narrator warns, “La mer est notre dernier silence” (93).

Whereas in *Le Désert mauve*, the desert was the physical equivalent of silence, in *Baroque d’aube* it is the sea. There are obvious similarities between the two: both are vast, timeless and beyond compare—“Au bord de la mer, je suis d’une superbe incommensurable” (93). They also both offer the possibility of pure experience. Cybil declares they have gone to sea “pour le corps, pour que l’esprit s’abandonne au vent, au silence et à la nuit” (135). And Occident worries:

Il y a à peine quelques années, nous pouvions affirmer sans risque: la mer est un présent continu, éternel recommencement. [. . .] je suis obsédée par l’idée que la mer ne puisse encore longtemps faire oeuvre de symbole. [. . .] quand un symbole cesse-t-il d’être un symbole?

(192)

However, Brossard, like Ondaatje, allows for the possibility of
finding a balance between language and silence. Although in danger, the sea and silence are still within our reach:

Un seul corps pour satisfaire l’envie de lumière et de mer. Un seul corps pour trouver les mots nécessaires, pour nous obliger à répéter. Le même pour comparer. Corps de mémoire pour inventer et progresser vers le silence.

(219)

I emphasize here that there is a possibility of finding balance, not a probability. Attention to physical experience is again put forth as the key. The narrator ends the novel with questions:

Un seul corps pour composer avec la jeune lumière du jour et la lueur des mots [. . .]. Les pensées changent-elles de nature parce que le corps attrape à d’autres niveaux le sens de la vie? Le corps peut-il simultanément faire attention aux choses universelles, à la couleur de l’aube et laisser faire la fiction? Les questions étaient de retour. Qu’allons-nous chercher dans le silence d’autrui [. . .]. (260)

The questions are open-ended and the answers are up to us: “How many trips to the sea to imagine what silence will be one day?” (Brossard, Marlatt 5).
Conclusion

With Nicole Brossard the issue that comes closest to being postmodern is an unrelenting concern with the vagaries of language. This is offset by the poignant knowledge of having "only one body" with which to experience life. A theme found in much of her work is that the only pure or authentic experience must pass directly between the object and the body. On the other hand, civilization or reality as we know it has been created by language--patriarchal language at that. Brossard gives a great deal of attention to the various and subtle ways in which words create reality. One conclusion is that reality and authentic experience are prevented from any sort of meeting. Language stands in the middle. This leads to several theories of translation. First experience must be translated into expression. And then female expression must be translated into a form dominated by patriarchal expression.

Despite the problems involved, women taking their place in language and therefore carving out their own space in reality is of utmost importance. *Le Désert mauve* follows the story of a girl still young and wild enough to have easy access to pure experience. The narrative makes clear the necessity of her move from silence to language. The confusion brought about by language is not minimized. Nor is the sense of loss caused by leaving behind the silence and therefore all chance of pure experience. However, in this novel there does not appear to be a middle ground. Losing the silence is regrettable but unavoidable. The stakes are too high.
In *Baroque d’aube*, women claiming a place in language is no longer a dream which must be fought for at every turn. From this new position, Brossard is quite comfortable in illustrating the many ways in which language can be abused by men and women alike. The telling of individual stories becomes urgent to the point of annoyance: for example, the life stories of the Demers brothers. The creation of reality is emphasized by sections of Virtual Reality, which sort of demands the question “Do we really know which is which?” But the most important result of the more critical view of language is a softening of positions on silence. The possibilities of the benefits of personal silence are explored. And the danger of losing touch with deep silence—the only real alternative to language—becomes imminent. Brossard’s message remains optimistic, though. There is still hope for some sort of balance between the two.
Joy Kogawa
The Burden of Untold Stories

While Joy Kogawa’s _Obasan_ is probably the ultimate novel about silence, it has been convincingly argued that Kogawa writes from a humanist rather than a postmodernist perspective. Rachelle Kanefsky states despite the “postmodern position on historical writing” that “Kogawa’s words are understood as relevant, accurate, and finally, as signifiers of truth” (15). According to Kanefsky:

>While each individual lives, perceives, and describes experiences in his or her own unique and, ultimately, subjective way, we do not as a society, or as a world community, function as disengaged, isolated entities. We live in communities, we share knowledge, and, most importantly, we share and act on a sense of what is true. (15)

Kogawa herself has said, “The values that I personally want to see go on are really universal values” (Redkop 101).

Nonetheless, her view of the “universal values” of humanism encompasses difference. In the same interview she states that a sense of belonging is a universal need:

>Some people can get that by belonging to a community of writers. Some people get that by belonging to an ethnic community. Whatever it is, people get strength from belonging. So I think that whatever promotes places of belonging—choices of areas of belonging—is OK. (98)
By this, she is not promoting isolation or the building of walls between groups:

I think if everybody was involved in the hyphen, then we would all be together. Even if we are all in different hyphens, we could put a line through the hyphens and be connected as a hyphenated people. (99)

The hyphen would become the universal value, and as Laurie Kruk points out, silence, instead of creating gaps, can help to fill them:

Silence, however, is an effective cross-cultural means of communicating, which can be found in religious traditions as diverse as Buddhism, with its meditations, or Quakerism, with its silent worship. This widespread understanding of the communicative role—if not the content—of silence, whether “speaking” silence or “attentive” silence, is especially useful to Kogawa’s avowed goal of bridging real differences between readers, and thus, at some level, undoing the largely linguistic acts of prejudice, fear, and discrimination. (77)

Despite all of this, Kogawa’s writing, especially in Obasan, shows a decidedly postmodern concern with the problems of language and the absolute truth. In the same line as this concern is her awareness of the affect that both memory and the stories of others can have on the creation of one’s own story. And there is, of course, Hutcheon’s claim that the ongoing postmodern tension between the centre and the margin opens up space for the previously silenced voices of those in the margins.
Perhaps one of the longest-standing examples of racial discrimination in North America has been the treatment of the various Asian communities. The W.W.II internment of Japanese-Canadians is the culmination of racist policies that have existed, as Lien Chao points out, from the very beginning. Chao’s work, *Beyond Silence*, examines the Chinese Canadian community’s transition from “a collective silence to a voice in the official discourse” (17). Chao considers the first major breakthrough to be *Inalienable Rice*. The anthology, published in 1979, was the result of a Writers’ Workshop formed in Vancouver in 1976. The appearance of Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* in 1982 was part of an explosion of words that has been a growing movement over the past twenty-five years. It should be noted, though, that *Obasan* was one of the first novels to directly address the war-time mistreatment of Japanese-Canadians.

With *Obasan*, Kogawa, as Chao does later, explores the many consequences of enforced silence. Both writers cite cultural misunderstanding as a major factor in perpetuating the situation. The stoic silence that is viewed as a sign of strength in many Asian cultures is viewed as weakness in the West. There is an unsuspected complicity between the abuser and the abused. In a similar vein, Chao states that choosing to write in any language other than English would create “a self-imposed and self-prolonged silence and isolation in Canadian culture” (23). If, as Brossard says, women can only speak patriarchal language with an accent, then Asian women have a double cross to bear.

So far this discussion has focused on *Obasan*. Kogawa’s latest book, *The Rain Ascends*, is quite another matter. In this novel the
silence of secrecy becomes a horrendous evil with virtually no redeeming qualities. Conspicuously missing from this work is deep silence on which the characters of the former novel could rely. Even personal silence which can be used as a refuge takes on sinister aspects. Despite the harsher treatment of silence, there is the familiar exploration of the nature of "true stories." Actually this too receives a very critical treatment. The flip side of the evil silence of secrecy is the lie. The Rain Ascends examines not only the lies we tell others, but even more importantly, the lies we tell ourselves.
With *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa brings a new dimension to the struggle between language and silence. Unlike in the work of Nicole Brossard, there is not a sense of having to sacrifice one in order to obtain the other. Neither is there a clear movement from one position to another. Kogawa’s novel is more an exploration of the positive and negative aspects of both and an effort to find a balance between the two. The protagonist of *Obasan*, Naomi, starts with an understanding that balance is possible rather than having to work towards such an understanding. However, Naomi’s suspicion of language is well justified. She has seen first hand the ways in which it can be manipulated. The combination of the abuse of language and enforced silence has her trapped inside an unhealthy type of silence. She must learn to negotiate the negative types of silence and language before any reconciliation of the positive types is possible. Much of the struggle is defined in the preface, but it, like the novel itself, offers only ambiguous solutions.

In the prologue, silence is divided, as Gary Willis points out (241), into two categories: “a silence that cannot speak” and “a silence that will not speak” (*Obasan* page before 1). For the purposes of this study, these two can easily be broken down even farther. The temptation to classify the various types of silence neatly under the two headings provided by the author is too great to ignore. The silence that will not speak is quite different in that it involves a choice. In this category are deep silence or attentive silence as defined by King-Kok Cheung; personal silence, used as a refuge by
both Naomi and Obasan; and the silence of secrecy, of those with something to lose—Old Man Gower or the Canadian government, for instance. Under the silence that cannot speak are enforced silence of the sort denounced by feminists and ethnic groups alike; the silence of secrecy of things too painful to speak, as described by Sibelman; and, of course, the silence of death or absence. These classifications, however, must immediately be qualified; the boundaries of each are murky, at best. For example, the silence of secrecy has been divided so that it occupies room under both of the original headings. This is because the first is a willful silence, while the second seems, at least, unavoidable. Also at some point attentive silence becomes a silence of refuge. And although the silence of things too painful to speak is listed under "cannot speak," it, unlike death, can be overcome. Nonetheless these classifications are a useful point of departure.

Cheung's article "Attentive silence in Joy Kogawa's Obasan" is, at least in part, a reaction to the many readings of the novel which concentrate on the negative consequences of silence. It introduces the Western reader to the positive aspects of silence probably taken for granted by most Asians. In her estimation, protective and stoic silence are completely separate from attentive silence. They are the source of much of the misunderstanding that blinds Western readers to the positive qualities of attentive silence. While there is a good deal of validity to her argument, there is also evidence that both of these originate in attentive silence and then develop into something else.
Western children are taught at a young age to voice their needs. "Ask and thou shalt receive" rings true to most Western parents. It is, therefore, understandable that a concept such as attentive silence might easily be misinterpreted. The narrator sums up the clash of cultures as follows:

Obasan, however, does not come from this clamorous climate. She does not dance to the multi-cultural piper’s tune or respond to the racist’s slur. She remains in a silent territory, defined by her serving hands. (226)

Naomi reaches this conclusion during an unprecedented visit by the Barkers to offer condolence after the death of Uncle. So uneasy are they with Obasan’s silence that they direct inquiries at Naomi despite Obasan’s presence in the room: "'Will Mrs. Nah Canny be all right here on her own?‘ Mrs. Barker asks me as Obasan pours the tea" (224).

Naomi, on the other hand, learns the language of silence at so young an age that she does not recall exactly who imparted the information:

Who is it who teaches me that in the language of eyes a stare is an invasion and a reproach? Grandma Kato? Obasan? Uncle? Mother? Each one, raised in Japan, speaks the same language; but Aunt Emily and Father, born and raised in Canada, are visually bilingual. I too learn the second language. (47)

This brings to mind the feminist assertion that all women are bilingual. However, the connotations here are much more positive. Whereas Brossard focuses on having to learn the other language in
order to communicate, Naomi is encouraged to polish her non-verbal
communication skills. She is taught that need should be recognized
without speech:

When I am hungry, and before I can ask, there is food. [. . .] A sweater covers me before there is any chill and if
there is pain there is care simultaneously. If Grandma
shifts uncomfortably, I bring her a cushion. (56)

It is appropriate that she is taught not by words but by “the
example of [her] mother’s and Grandma’s alert and accurate knowing”
(56).

That she is proficient in her second language is shown by her
ability to practice on her own. Sitting quietly in the swamp, she
realizes, “The longer I sit, the more I see [. . .] If I do not move
at all the toads and frogs croak and breet rhythmically” (204-205).
When she and Stephen begin to speak, though, the swamp becomes as
quiet “as an orchestra poised waiting for a signal from the
conductor. It listens to us” (205). Already she is discovering that
many things can only be perceived through silence and are driven
into hiding by speech.

If a large part of attentive silence is a matter of
“sensitivity and appropriate gestures” (56), the stoic silence
mentioned by Cheung clearly springs from the same impulse. It is
one’s duty to “always honour the wishes of others before our own”
and shameful to be “’wagamama’—selfish and inconsiderate” (128).
This concept is well illustrated by the story of Momotaro:

The time comes when Momotaro must go and silence falls
like feathers of snow all over the rice-paper hut. [. .
There are no tears and no touch. Grandfather and Grandmother are careful, as he goes, not to weight his pack with their sorrow. (56)

The story is repeated when Grandma and Grandpa Nakane are taken by ambulance from Slocan:

Obasan held Grandma Nakane’s hand tightly until the driver came to close the ambulance door. Grandpa Nakane strained to sit up and tried to smile as he waved good-bye to Stephen and me, the ends of his moustache rising and falling. None of us spoke. [. . . ] We will make the way smooth by restraining emotion. Though we might wish Grandma and Grandpa to stay, we must watch them go.

(127-128)

Although stoic silence can become tightly wound with feelings of both pride and shame, it begins as a consideration of the feelings of others.

Stoicism becomes a negative force largely in the eyes of others. In Japanese culture the ability to persevere against hardship without complaint is proof of courage. Stephen’s silence after he is beaten by the white boys serves two purposes. First, it is a sign of strength. Second, it protects his honour. If he does not speak, his family, at least, will not know of his humiliation. As Cheung points out, their silence “attests at once to their strength of endurance and their power to forgive;” however, “[t]o the dominant culture their silence suggested passivity and weakness, and encouraged open season on them” (“Attentive Silence in Joy Kogawa’s Obasan” 119). This is the crux of the narrator’s
ambivalence regarding this type of silence. Caught between worlds as she is, she realizes that the behaviour the Issei consider honorable actually works against them.

Protective silence, on the other hand, is easily traced to attentive silence. It is simply another version of silently attending to the needs of others—"kodomo no tame. For the sake of the children..." (21). Naomi says her "memories were drowned in a whirlpool of protective silence" (21). Despite beginning in the same impulse, this tends to move away from attentive silence. Rather than being a source from which understanding is derived, protective silence, like stoic silence, becomes a tool: silence itself is used to protect. It is at this point that both stoic and protective silences cross the line from being attentive silence and enter the realm of personal silence. Like all tools they can be used or abused. Long after the children being protected are no longer children, the silence continues. Interestingly, this is the one form of silence the "word warrior," Aunt Emily, will not break. Even though she is devoted to bringing the truth to light, she side-steps Naomi's questions. Ironically, Aunt Emily deliberately moves the conversation from the house to the "quietness and spaciousness of the night" before she says, "Nomi, I've told you all I can about them" (186).

Sooner or later, the reason behind the silence becomes as much self-protection as it is the protection of others. Naomi observes that Obasan often takes refuge in silence. In times of stress she "surrounds herself with a determined kind of stillness" (38). Undoubtedly, this has always been the only weapon of defense at her
disposal and "[o]ver the years, silence within her small body has grown large and powerful" (14). She uses her weapon to full advantage. Any increase in pressure only causes her to retreat farther: "The greater my urgency to know, the thicker her silences have always been" (45). The narrator attests to the fact that, despite all misunderstandings, this is not a passive stance. Naomi knows that "no urging on [her] part will persuade her of anything. She will do what she will do. She will rest when she is ready to rest" (17). Indeed, both Obasan and Uncle are experts at using silence as a refuge. Although Uncle includes Naomi in his annual trip to the coulee, he never tells her why. Naomi says, "From both Obasan and Uncle I have learned that speech often hides like an animal in a storm" (3). The description of speech as being in hiding is telling here. It suggests that speech has something to fear in coming out into the open. Naomi describes herself in the same terms: "Speech hides within me watchful and afraid" (58).

Although she knows that "it's the children who say nothing who are in trouble more than the ones who complain," she continues to defend her own reticence (34). Aunt Emily's crusade is dismissed as pointless since "all of this belongs to yesterday and there are so many other things to attend to today" (43). As a matter of self-defense, old wounds should not be reopened. She reasons, "Some memories, too, might better be forgotten. [. . .] What is past recall is past pain" (45). She uses her refuge in much the same way that Stephen uses silence to protect his pride--in the hope that that which is not acknowledged will lose power. Naomi discredits Aunt Emily's approach to past injustice on the grounds that
“People who talk a lot about their victimization make [her] uncomfortable. It’s as if they use their suffering as weapons or badges of some kind” (34). Nonetheless, she realizes that it is Aunt Emily who shines “her flashlight to where the rest of us crouch and hide, our eyes downcast as we seek the safety of invisibility” (32). However, neither invisibility nor silence have protected her as well as she would like to believe. She admits:

And I am tired, I suppose, because I want to get away from all this. From the past and all these papers, from the present, from the memories, from the deaths, from Aunt Emily and her heap of words. I want to break loose from the heavy identity, the evidence of rejection, the unexpressed passion, the misunderstood politeness. (183)

While she cannot embrace the extreme positions of either of her aunts, she knows her own position is not the answer either.

What Naomi is searching for is some sort of middle ground where she can speak her truth in full light of the knowledge that

[all our ordinary stories are changed in time, altered as much by the present as the present is shaped by the past. Potent and pervasive as a prairie dust storm, memories and dreams seep and mingle through cracks, settling on furniture and into upholstery. Our attics and living rooms encroach on each other, deep into their invisible places. (25)

While none of this detracts from the importance of telling the story, even the episodic form of the telling attests to the subjectivity of memory. When Naomi asks about the Japanese letters,
Obasan hands her a picture of her mother and says, "These are the best memories" (46). Because of its matter-of-fact nature, the camera is particularly deceptive. There is no denying that a photograph represents the truth of a particular moment in time. It tells nothing, however, of the preceding, following or even surrounding moments. As Naomi says, "Even my eleven-year-olds know that you can't 'capture life's precious moments'" (20).

Naomi does have ample reason to be suspicious of words. She has long been a victim of the highly selective silence and manipulation of language of those who stand to lose from the truth. The lessons begin early with Old Man Gower who comes offering candy and stories (62). This is her first encounter with such duplicity. He asks her questions, tells her about another little girl who talks to him (63) and then cautions her not to talk: "'Don't tell your mother,' he whispers into my ear. This is what he always says" (64). When he sits in her living room, talking to her father his "voice is unlike the low gurgling sound I am used to when he talks to me alone. [. . .] He sounds as if he is trying to comfort my father, but there is a falseness in the tone. The voice is too sure--too strong" (69).

On a much larger scale there is, of course, the duplicity of the Canadian government and its right hand, the media. Aunt Emily objects to the terminology used to describe the relocations: "The government called them 'Interior Housing Projects'! With language like that you can disguise any crime" (34). Then there is the newspaper article claiming "Jap Evacuees Best Beet Workers" (193). The narrator comments on the accompanying photograph and caption: "'Grinning and happy' and all smiles standing around a pile of
beets? That is one telling. It's not how it was" (197). Far worse are the newspapers "printing outright lies (85) during the evacuations in order to justify the government's actions. Perhaps the greatest damage done to Aunt Emily by the onslaught of propaganda is the doubt it creates in her own mind. So strong is her belief in democracy that a report of "Japanese naval officers living on the coast" causes her to wonder, "I'd hate to think we couldn't tell a fisherman from a sailor. Maybe the articles are true. I wonder if there's a cover-up. Surely we'd know if there were any spies. But gosh--who can we trust?" (94).

She learns early on that persecution and oppression bring out both the best and the worst in people. There are stories of courage, such as Eiko who stands up to the Mountie in defense of the women and children in the camp (100) and the women on the train who share what little they have with the young mother of a newborn baby. However, Aunt Emily notes how quickly there evolves "a three-way split in the community [ . . . ]. Some people want to fight. Others say our only chance is to co-operate with the government" (91). And then there are those who "are out to save their own skins" (102). Such in-fighting undoubtedly did more to further the aims of the government than those of the Japanese-Canadian community. In fact, so successful was the government policy that Aunt Emily claims, "We've never recovered from the dispersal policy. But of course that was the government's whole idea--to make sure we'd never be visible again" (34). At the time she writes in her journal that those "who have had faith in Canada [ . . . ] are the most hurt" (100). The hurt runs so deep that thirty years later finds her "spluttering" about a
"man at the conference who quite openly applauded the wholesale imprisonment of Canadian and American Japanese" (35). She despairs that the community has found no "collective social conscience" (35).

Despite the fragmentation of the community, the ambivalence that shrouds all the other types of silence in the novel is completely absent where enforced silence is concerned. Characters, narrator and author stand united in their condemnation of this type of silence. The Japanese-Canadian community is utterly cut off from the rest of society and, in many cases, from each other. Aunt Emily reports that all "three Japanese newspapers have been closed down" (81) and "our beautiful radios are gone. We had to give them up or suffer the humiliation of having them taken" (85). Not only is news prevented from coming in but "not a word from the camps makes the papers. Everything is hushed up" (101). To the outside world, as Aunt Emily remarks, it is "as if we never existed" (88). Finally, not even communication among themselves is left untouched: "All cards and letters are censored" (101). As Naomi observes, "We are the despised rendered voiceless, stripped of car, radio, camera and every means of communication" (111).

Although the silencing here is much more blatant, the attitudes it provokes align Kogawa in some ways with Brossard and other feminists. Aunt Emily's desire to "Write the vision and make it plain. Habakkuk 2:2" (31) has a certain affinity with Brossard's "Taking my name into the city." Both certainly see words as the only proper response to enforced silence, almost to the point that all silence is seen as evil. Both think the only cure for past wounds is in "gluing our tongues back on" (36).
However, the importance placed on the silenced stories in *Obasan* brings Kogawa closer to Ondaatje and the pictures on the cave wall than to Brossard. Naomi and Aunt Emily, who have very different approaches to past injustice, are both disturbed by the way all traces of their existence in Slocan have been erased: “What remains of our time there? [. . .] Where on the map or on the road was there any sign? Not a mark was left” (117). Aunt Emily declares her “biggest effort” to be the sixty-page document entitled *The Story of the Nisei in Canada*. Like so many characters in the other novels I have discussed, they, too, have a strong desire to leave their “mark on the wall.”

For Kogawa the postmodern angst over the ability to tell the true story does nothing to diminish the possibility and necessity of telling her story. With *Obasan*, however, Kogawa acknowledges another problem in telling one’s story—a problem that has been described by Simon Sibelman in his work on Elie Wiesel. Sibelman claims that a story too painful will lose its audience and, therefore in effect, be silenced:

> Our ability to comprehend the horror and chaos of natural disaster is limited enough; much less are we capable of assessing the brutality imposed by manmade ones. [. . .] The poets of the First World War recognized how the public rejected their particular message; the survivors of the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki recognized the world would be unable to understand the frightening magnitude and reality of their disaster. (Sibelman 25)
People tend to distance themselves from that which they find too horrifying. In *Obasan* this type of silence is caused more by the fear of horrifying people than the fact. This is the case with Naomi’s refusal to tell about Old Man Gower: “If I tell my mother about Mr. Gower, the alarm will send a tremor through our bodies and I will be torn from her” (64).

The most important example of this type of silence is the story of Naomi’s mother and grandmother in Japan:

She and my mother, she writes, were unable to talk of all the things that happened. The horror would surely die sooner, they felt, if they refused to speak. But the silence and the constancy of the nightmare had become unbearable for Grandma [. . .]. “For the burden of these words forgive me.” [. . .] Mother, for her part, continued her vigil of silence. She spoke with no one about her torment. She specifically requested that Stephen and I be spared the truth. (236)

Only in retrospect does Naomi understand the damage done by this type of silence: “Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction” (243).

Because it sets the tone, absolute silence is the most pervasive type in the novel. Everything else takes place against the backdrop of the absolute silence. There is, however a duality to this type of silence brought about by the disappearance of Naomi’s mother. Absolute silence here, at least in its pure form, has much in common with the type of silence in which Buddy Bolden sought meaning and the type represented by the desert in Ondaatje and the
desert and the sea in Brossard. And the night sky. The vastness of
the desert, the sea and the sky suggest on first consideration
emptiness and absence. In all cases this is proven untrue, although
it is necessary to abandon preconceptions and approach them on their
own terms. By analogy the same may be said of the absolute silence
of Obasan. If anything, the connection between silence and the sea
and the need to approach the silence to gain meaning is even more
explicit. As previously mentioned, the major questions and the
possible answers explored in the novel are set up in the prologue:

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the
dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes
forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can
hear it say, is to embrace its absence. (prologue)

The narrator clearly states that meaning, “the speech that frees,”
originates in this other place, “the sensate sea”, “the amniotic
deep”--also referred to as an “underground stream” (prologue).
Attentive silence is called into play here by the recognition that
in order to understand the voice, she must “embrace its absence.”
The same silence that allows her to anticipate the needs of others
will allow her to make peace with deep silence.

In the same passage the narrator continues, “I fail at the
task. The word is stone. [. . .] I hate the stillness. I hate the
stone” (prologue). Interestingly, the biblical quotation on the
previous page promises, “[I] will give him a white stone and in the
stone a new name written.” Whatever meaning might be contained in
the stone, it is not readily accessible:
Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. The sound I hear is only sound. White sound. Words, when they fall, are pock marks on the earth. They are hailstones seeking an underground stream. (prologue)

Even the hailstones seek to unite with the underground stream, unable to "burst with telling" on their own.

Naomi's alienation from the underground stream, or the positive aspects of deep silence, is brought about by the disappearance of her mother:

What matters to my five-year-old mind is not the reason that she is required to leave, but the stillness of waiting for her to return. After a while, the stillness is so much with me that it takes the form of a shadow which grows and surrounds me like air. Time solidifies, ossifies the waiting into molecules of stone, dark microscopic planets that swirl through the universe of my body waiting for light and the morning. (66)

The "stillness of waiting" is turned to stone by her vague feeling that she is responsible for her mother's departure. She does not tell her mother about Old Man Gower because she is afraid she "will be torn from her" (64). She realizes, though, that the damage has already been done: "the secret has already separated us" (64). With a child's understanding of cause and effect, she notes, "It is around this time that Mother disappears. I hardly dare to think, let alone ask, why she has to leave" (66). Only much later is she able
to acknowledge that they "were lost together in [their] silences" (243).

Because of the early ambiguity surrounding silence, Naomi spends much of her life caught between denial and acceptance. Her desire to understand leads her to a more persistent approach. Her insistence on answers works no better here than it does with Ohasan: "I ask the night sky but the silence is steadfast. There is no reply. [. . .] I hate the staring into the night. The questions thinning into space. The sky swallowing the echoes" (prologue). The image of words being sent out into space is repeated by her attempts to communicate with both her mother and father. Her letters to her mother "were never answered or returned" (236). For many years, she simply refuses to acknowledge her father's death: "My last letter to Father has received no answer" (208).

There are, however, instances when the right approach is made clear to her. During a quiet moment she is tempted to read Aunt Emily's book, "heavy with voices from the past," but says, "[R]ight now it is Uncle's absent voice that speaks even more urgently and that I must attend" (46). And in the stillness of the moments between sleeping and waking, she is aware of a presence in her room:

Something has touched me but I do not know what it is. Something not human, not animal [. . .]. She is here. She is not here. She is reaching out to me with a touch deceptive as down, with hands and fingers that wave like grass around my feet, and her hair falls and falls and falls from her head like streamers of paper rain. She is
a maypole woman to whose apron-strings I cling and around whose skirts I dance. (167)

At moments when Naomi is receptive to the silence, she is able to hear its message. However, she seems to be aware of this only on a subconscious level.

The "right approach" is also revealed to her in a dream. She dreams the Grand Inquisitor is questioning her mother:

His demand to know was both a judgement and a refusal to hear. The more he questioned her, the more he was her accuser and murderer. The more he killed her, the deeper her silence became. What the Grand Inquisitor has never learned is that the avenues of speech are the avenues of silence. To hear my mother, to attend her speech, to attend the sound of stone, he must first become silent. Only when he enters her abandonment will he be released from his own. (228)

This passage echoes the prescribed path of the prologue. Naomi recognizes her affinity to the Grand Inquisitor: "Am I her accuser?" (228). On some level she knows that to "attend its voice" she must "embrace its absence" (prologue). The theory is played out in her waking life in Slocan, during a rafting misadventure with a friend. When Naomi abandons herself to the lake, she is rescued by Rough Lock Bill, the storyteller (149). The raft and the water are images that come back to her later when trying to comprehend her mother's silence (241). Nonetheless, at this point in time, the realization is not yet solid enough to provide her with a solution to her own dilemma.
In the end it is words that allow her to accept the silence. After she hears the letters from her grandmother explaining what befell them in Japan, Naomi is finally able to let go of the guilt she felt over her own silence and the doubt she felt over her mother’s love (228). In the wake of the reading, she resumes an old practice:

Gradually the room grows still and it is as if I am back with Uncle again, listening and listening to the silent earth and the silent sky as I have done all my life.

I close my eyes.

Mother. I am listening. Assist me to hear you.

(240)

What is different this time is that she feels a connection with her mother: “Martyr Mother, you pilot your powerful voicelessness over the ocean and across the mountain, straight as a missile to our hut on the edge of a sugar-beet field” (241-2). She is, at last, able to understand that her mother’s silence was an act of love, not abandonment. She thinks,

I can know your presence though you are not here. The letters tonight are skeletons. Bones only. But the earth still stirs with dormant blooms. Love flows through the roots of the trees by our graves. (243)

Since “wordlessness was our mutual destruction,” words are required to clear up the confusion keeping Naomi from finding the balance between language and silence that she needs in her life (243).
Although the truth is horrifying, Naomi knows "[t]he song of mourning is not a lifelong song" (246). She knows the grief will pass and she has found a new peace of mind:

Father, Mother, my relatives, my ancestors, we have come to the forest tonight, to the place where the colours all meet—red and yellow and blue. We have turned and returned to your arms as you turn to earth and form the forest floor. [. . .]

My loved ones, rest in your world of stone. Around you flows the underground stream. (246)

The novel ends with the images introduced in the prologue, except Naomi is now able to "follow the stream down and down to the hidden voice" and "come at last to the freeing word." With her new awareness, she returns alone to the coulee:

Above the trees, the moon is a pure white stone. The reflection is rippling in the river—water and stone dancing. It’s a quiet ballet, soundless as breath. [. . .]

"Umi no yo," [Uncle] always said. "It’s like the sea." (247)

The water—which contains the freeing speech—and the stone—which hides the word from her—dancing together are symbolic of the harmony she has finally achieved. She has finally managed to balance the silence with the word.
Elements and concerns clearly identifiable as postmodern are as highly visible in *The Rain Ascends* as they are in *Obasan*. The self-conscious narrator, the non-linear story line and the concern with the co-existence of multiple truths are still important to the story. In fact, this is probably the most crucial question of the novel: how can two completely irreconcilable stories both exist and both be true simultaneously? There is, also, an almost Brossardian interest in the creation of reality. However, many of Kogawa's conclusions, especially in regards to silence, are quite different. Silence functions here largely as the opposite of language, or at least of the truth. Although there are faint echoes of *Obasan* to be observed, *The Rain Ascends* offers little in the way of positive possibilities of silence.

The storyline of this novel illustrates the best of the postmodern tradition. The movement from present to recent past to distant past is quick and subtle and requires the close attention of the reader. The slow revelation of various aspects of the story is also very subtle. The crimes of Charles Shelby are alluded to on numerous occasions before they are named outright. Even the account the narrator, Millicent, receives from her mother goes through many tellings to arrive at the whole story. Her mother first refuses to answer her questions at all. In Millicent's first version, she repeats only her mother saying, "It was my fault, my fault" (62). She later recounts how her mother answered her questions with two cryptic words: "Sex" and "Boys" (66-67). Similarly, we are given a picture of
a middle-aged spinster living in her parents' home. It is not until more than halfway through the novel that we learn of her son. Only small bits of silence are obliterated at a time.

Kogawa's extensive use of intertextuality is both biblical and fictional in nature. Millicent compares her situation with her father to that of the princess and the lion king on the island of Dr. Moreau (102-09). And the novel begins with a retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac, in which she casts herself as Abraham, the executioner, and her father as Isaac, the sacrifice. She hopes desperately that "the ram will appear" so that she "won't have to say the lethal words" (5). Each in its own way, both of these comparisons are faulty. The lion king cannot be said to have sinned since he is only being true to nature (an argument that resurfaces later). And Isaac was an innocent--a claim which certainly cannot be made for her father. The incongruity of these analogies points towards a tendency to self-delusion on the part of the narrator.

The novel is constructed in such a way as to leave little doubt as to the self-conscious nature of the narration. It begins and ends with the act of writing, most of which is an attempt to appease her sister-in-law's eager sense of justice which cannot condone a silence of secrecy any longer. Millicent begins her tale by stating: "I have enough faith to sit here in the fog by the phone, writing, not writing, telling not telling. I have enough faith to try again, one more, one more time" (5). As she struggles with the guilt of both speaking and of remaining silent, she declares, "By the sword of your pen, you are to slay your lifelong lies" (72). Then near the end she
writes, "And so Eleanor, I have come stumbling and exhausted towards the last chapter. The long silence has seeped out of my fingernails, out of my dried tear ducts" (202).

Like Naomi in Obasan, Millicent is aware of the shaky nature of her own position as a seeker of truth. However, Naomi doubts the veracity of childhood memories unearthed many years later. Millicent, on the other hand, doubts her own knowledge because of the many years she has spent deceiving herself. When she finally finds the ram intended to replace Isaac/her father, she discovers its "name is Fiction" (71). She is clear about the goal of her writing and the problems associated with it: "I am to slay my fictions, I know, but I often do not know what my fictions are" (157). A conflict of interests blurs her vision: "Some call it love. Some call it idolatry--the love of what is false. Some call it denial" (152).

One of the effects of the shifting storyline is that it makes visible all possible aspects of the story before positing any as "real." Indeed, the novel is a chronicle of Millicent’s struggle to make "all the truths" known (100). She tells her brother that his version is "not the only truth" (100). In turn, her sister-in-law accuses her of being "like Hitler’s cat" (12). She at first balks at the idea and then thinks, "On the great judgement day, Hitler’s cat can stand in front of that awesome cloud of witnesses and yowl its unacceptable tale of affection" (12). Still she persists in trying to make others see her "view from a lowly place beside a bowl of milk and a plate of table scraps" (13). Truth, especially in a postmodern sense, is largely a matter of perspective.
One of the more disturbing mysteries of life is that absolute beauty and absolute horror can exist at the same time in the world and both be equally true. For Millicent, coming to terms with the duality of the world is not so difficult as trying to understand the same in her father. From her vantage point by the milk bowl, Millicent has witnessed the incredible good of which her father is capable, "that hundreds of people have been brought back to life. He's been wonderful to people" (49). She does not "doubt the authenticity" of his many "miracle tales" (30). But at the same time she must acknowledge that there are much darker truths about him. She recognizes in him a man of immense appetites and immense contradictions, a man who is greatly admired and equally despised, a man of faith and a man of falsehood. The world has never been big enough for him, this saint and sinner combined [. . .] this man of great secrecy and great openness, this charismatic communicator and liar, this man who indulges himself, who sacrifices himself [. . .]. I do not know how he survives the quicksand of his own paradoxical being.

(18)

She is left wondering: "How can a man so good be so bad? How can a man so bad be so good? He is loved, he is despised, he is Jekyll and Hyde" (102). It is the saint she wishes to protect by shrouding the sinner in silence.

The entire problem is illustrated by a small incident that takes place late in the story. Millicent and her father are in the habit of
taking afternoon tea on the porch. Their enjoyment watching their cat and the neighbour’s cat “chasing each other, chasing the squirrels and the birds” (177) is changed by the arrival of a pair of nesting swallows. The “miraculous and joyful” (179) activity of seeing the baby birds grow casts a different light on the previously innocent antics of the cats. The cats are not inherently evil—they are just cats. It is the human perspective that changes. When first one cat kills three of the babies and then the remaining two die of an infestation in the nest, “[t]he summer of miracle” becomes “the summer of sadness” (181). These events not only show the good existing alongside the bad, but also allude again to the inevitability of the beast acting according to its nature.

Another type of truth that comes into question here is the type constructed by society. This sort of construction is reminiscent of the construction of reality in Brossard’s novels. However, for Brossard, reality, no matter what its origin, is not so easily dismissed. In The Rain Ascends the various views held by various societies over time are brought up as plausible excuses for the Reverend Selby’s behaviour. Martin, who speaks from the experience of having been molested as a child, claims, “Sensibilities change. Did you know that Thomas Aquinas felt masturbation was worse than rape?” (113). He goes on to argue that sex does not harm children, “that the body is sensual right from the first moment” (113-14). It is, in his opinion, only the condemnation of the “goody goods” of society that make it seem wrong:
All through history it's been good people like you who stone people. You drown them. You burn them at the stake. You think you have the right to decide who the deviants are and then you sacrifice them. (115)

He goes so far as to "bet we'll have adult-child sex legitimized in the next--" (113). Millicent would love dearly to believe that the pedophile is merely the social outcast of the moment and that he really harms no one. She later refers to how homosexuality is no longer condemned as it once was (193). However, Martin's well-adjusted, good nature is a front for his own protective layer of personal silence. All of Martin's well-argued theories are cast into doubt by his repeated suicide attempts.

The construction of reality in The Rain Ascends is on a much more individual level than in either of the Brossard novels. It is also much more consciously intentional. Each of the victims of the fallout from the Reverend's crimes builds his or her own "house of cards" and invests all of his or her energy into keeping "the roof from caving in" (63). Some of the new reality is constructed with language, but, unlike in the case of Brossard, even more is constructed through silence. Also different here is the fact that this reality is constructed on top of a pre-existing collective reality. Millicent's objective of destroying her own version of reality carries the assumption that she will rejoin the collective—or "normal"—version of reality. This gives reality in this novel much more authenticity than Brossard would allow it in her own work.
Millicent’s house of cards is well supported by the stories of Reverend Shelby. His reputation as a “much loved and popular priest” (37) is further spread by a weekly radio show and later the national magazine article about the Juniper Centre and the “community touched by grace” (47-48). So well constructed is his fame that it and not his disgrace follows him to a new community where “the once well-known host of ‘Shelby Selects’ and founder of the Juniper Centres, was eagerly welcomed by the priest and parishioners of St. John’s Church in Ragland” (97). Millicent is more than happy to let the stories stand. She goes so far as to invite friends over to watch an old documentary about the Juniper Centre. Her friends are, of course, in awe of the “picture-perfect family” and she thinks:

The part of me that was discomfited fell into step with the old guard that marched proudly in the glow of the Shelby family parade. “Father is phenomenal. It’s true. He really is.” (161)

Much of the reality of the Shelby family is created by the Reverend himself. Millicent describes her father as “a total communicator” whose “appetite for conversation is immense” (37). Their “home was a turbulent river, overflowing with stories, songs, feastings. There were always people around” (42). At first it is enough to amaze his congregation with the stories of the miracles he has experienced and trust them to do the rest. After the scandal becomes known, he must work much harder at keeping his image intact. He is obliged to
create his own publicity. As the applause he craved no longer rained down upon him, he began his own campaign of confetti, paper praises, self congratulations. Boasting increasingly dominated his conversations. He wrote articles trumpeting his past glories and successes. (82)

Even in his old age he never misses a chance to replay his life for an audience--the past is even easier to construct than the present--and he enjoys being "onstage [. . . ] glorying in his many accomplishments, congratulating himself shamelessly, chuckling about the making of the documentary" (163). He lives in a world of his own making. As the narrator says, "We construct our lives out of the tales we tell ourselves" (86).

Although his areas of speech and silence are always carefully chosen, there are only three circumstances which completely rob Reverend Shelby of the power of speech. All three are brought about by a direct challenge to his version of reality. The first is when his crimes become public and he is sent home "strangely injured and vacant" (58). Only after several silent weeks of solitude, despite Millicent's desperate attempts to get him to talk, does he slowly begin to come "back to himself" (80). The second situation that leaves him a "submissive, ghostly man" is the presence of his accusing, unforgiving son (82). The third incident occurs after Millicent broaches the subject of his molestation of his grandson. A mild stroke brings a sermon to an end and leaves him at a gathering, "sitting there quietly, nodding, not speaking, not engaging in easy
banter (172). He tells Millicent, "God is telling me I'm talking too much" (172) and does not speak again that day.

In a large departure from Brossard's theory of how reality is created, the reality or "houses of cards" in this novel depends even more on what is not said than on what is said. Silence here carries all of the negative connotations found in O bases but very few of the positive ones. As in O bases silence of refuge and the silence of self-interested secrecy loom large. Less apparent but still present is enforced silence. The Reverend Shelby is, obviously, the character with the most to lose should the silence be broken. The storyteller is engulfed by a great silence. "This charismatic communicator and liar" is a "man of great secrecy and great openness" (18). Millicent muses, "How many men there must be, like Father, who have become heroes by excising their villainies from their stories" (24).

As for Millicent, her home changed from one "overflowing with stories" (42) to one that was "eerily quiet" and "songless" (57). After first asking "too many questions" in response to the "sudden silences" at her appearance, she is told about the scandal, and she too retreats into silence:

I missed weeks of school. I developed the habit of walking rapidly, books clutched to my chest, eyes on the ground. [. . .] "Don't talk about it," a voice within me still says. "It's too dangerous." [. . .] Once upon a time I discovered a beam of moon dust and followed its pale light to a make-believe world so compelling it took years to emerge from its spell. (88 -89)
And it takes her years to realize that with the failure to speak "the weight of silence grows" (64).

Her mother, Meredith, takes refuge in silence with almost the same expertise as Obasan. Millicent pesters her with questions until she "answers in one-word sentences" (62). Her response to persistence is to "[turn] away and [say] nothing" until Millicent threatens to ask a friend's mother (66). Only then does she reply and, other than blaming herself, says only two words: "Sex" and "Boys" (66-67). Millicent comments on the house of cards she builds after that conversation: "Mother helped. She did not once attempt to blow the walls down. We never ever talked of it again. Not once" (63). Meredith is fond of paraphrasing the Bible: "Barnabas is a good man" (34). That is all the Bible has to say about Barnabas and "all Mother allowed herself to know about Father" (34). Millicent reasons, "Perhaps she chose her fictions of a devoted son and 'a good man,' over reality" (86). Her mother has long practiced of keeping her image intact through silence. Millicent finds out after her mother's death "that she and Uncle Jack were illegitimate children," leading her to wonder, "[w]hat other secrets" are "locked away in her lonely grave" (75). Meredith's last words are "Barnabas is a good man."

Enforced silence is represented in The Rain Ascends by the Reverend's many victims. Millicent at last accepts that her father "silenced the children" and worries that they turned to castles "made of wind and dust, to bottles, to needles, to many forms of speechlessness" (199-200). The silence of the children is made even harsher by the fact that the vast majority of them remain anonymous.
throughout the novel. To the reader they are shadowy, ghostlike figures haunting the background of the story. This is perhaps symbolic of the shadows and silence in which such children continue to live their lives. The bishop is amazed that out of an estimated three hundred "none of the victims have come forward" (207). The other victim that we are made aware of is Jeffrey, Millicent's son. After she is told the truth years later, she remembers "that he had changed rather suddenly from being a somewhat audacious and growingly rambunctious youth to a docile, curiously cautious and somewhat cooperative boy. She remember[s] being pleasantly surprised" (125). When she asks him about it, he says he never spoke of it because he "thought [she] knew" (139). Still at this point he does not want to talk about it: "It's no big deal, Mom. He's not violent or anything like that" (140). Even the victims who are not anonymous are rendered silent by the Reverend's actions.

The only place that silence has any of the positive possibilities seen in Obasan is through prayer. And perversely, it is Reverend Shelby who experiences it:

He has a prayer notebook with the names of people to whom he is intimately connected by letters and phone calls. Every day, he faithfully prays for each one, and sometimes he becomes aware of someone in special need. Later a letter will arrive telling him what he learned while in prayer. (101)

For example, he feels a sudden urge to call an old friend. After a pleasant conversation, he receives a letter from the man's wife,
asking him to call, "saying her husband was suffering from severe
depression and had not been able to talk to anyone for months" (101).
In another incident he is "anxious to visit" an elderly woman "right
away" (31). A few hours later they learn she has "died peacefully"
(32).

There are some echoes of *Obasan* in *The Rain Ascends*; however,
like the brief suggestion of positive silence, they are not strong.
Millicent, like Naomi, realizes she must walk through the fire in
order to find any sort of peace. They both struggle for some sort of
freeing understanding. In the same way that Naomi must embrace the
absence in order to hear her mother, Millicent is told: "unless I
enter my grief and rage, I will in no way walk through the gates of
the beautiful city" (135).

Rocks filled with words and the silent stream both make brief
appearances. In the first pages it is the Goddess of Mercy "who is in
the act of flinging stones onto the forest floor--white stones,
stepping stones, word stones" (2). Millicent later says she has spent
her life "among stones full of groans too deep for uttering" (200).
But the stones that Millicent deals with seem far too heavy to "burst
with the telling." Pouring out "the whole unmitigated story," she
says, "The hard, hard stones of judgement, the dense and heavy weight
that my frail love could not melt were cast upwards" (206-07). As
often as not she turns her anger inward as when she kills the small
gnat of hope "with the stone that my heart now is" (196). At other
times the stones are even more deadly: "As I stone you, dear Father,
I am stoning your Father, and I am stoning my love" (200-01).
Neither is the silent stream so positive as the underground stream of *Obasan*. It makes its first appearance in the references to the fantasy land of Dr. Moreau. There, instead of containing truth, the stream carries it away: "And more silent than all the silence is the stream that washes away the scent of blood" (107). In the effort to hold onto her image of her lion-king father’s goodness, the daughter spends more and more time "by the silent stream" (123). On the other hand, Millicent, despite the close analogy between her and the lion-king’s daughter, has come to know that this is not the answer:

Claws, Mother. I still need to claw my way out of the ocean depths. How many of us are down here in the silent waters, curled up into ourselves with our untellable tales? (77)

Meaning, rather than being offered by silent waters, seems to be drowned in them.

Finally, however, it is words, and not silence, in both novels that offer some form of freedom and peace of mind. *The Rain Descends*, as previously noted, is Millicent’s attempt to put on paper "the truth" that "is unspeakable" (9). Her efforts to actually speak to her father are, for the most part, completely ineffective. She goes through one "spasm of a conversation" and "failed effort to speak" after another (19). But with "each failed effort the weight of silence grows" (64). She, therefore, cannot give up the effort:

I am seeking the light after my life-long night. I am telling the untellable to myself, to others, in whispers,
in intimate conversation. And with every breath in my body
I am striving to be free, that the child of my child may
be strong and truthful and unashamed. (201)

When at last she convinces her father to answer her questions, the
conversation proves to be cathartic for both of them. She tells him,
"My pain is because I don't understand" (191). In an attempt at
understanding, she says,

"Didn't St. Paul say we must bear one another's burdens?
If you've never told anyone--it must be such a great
burden for you."

He nods. (193)

In the aftermath of her confession to the bishop, Millicent perceives
no "touch of anger or blame" in his voice (212). He tells her, "I can
only hope that you can feel some ease now, some peace" (212). She is
now able to feel pity for him rather than hatred. She can believe
"there is still worth in him. [. . .] he is not a totally evil man"
(212).

Although, in the end Millicent is still a disciple of multiple
truths, she has been forced to give "all the truths" her attention.
The Rain Ascends belies the accusation that postmodernism diminishes
the value of "the truth" through this practice. Ironically, the
silence that might have allowed Buddy Bolden some peace in Coming
Through Slaughter has had the opposite effect on her. Silence
provided her with the ability to be too selective in her stories.
Early in the text, Millicent describes her task: "What is required is
to see the face behind the face, the hideous face of Mr. Hyde that
you know is there, but that you have not once, not ever, seen" (17). Despite the evidence of her own eyes, of her own experience, she knows there is more than one story. And a story untold is a burden (193).
Conclusion

Without any doubt the shift between Kogawa’s early and later novel is the most drastic of any considered here, especially in terms of silence. In Obasan, the problems associated with one culture practicing a form of silence misunderstood by the other culture were acknowledged. But none of these problems stood as reason enough to reconsider their position—a position maintained despite an unconditional condemnation of enforced silence. It is the distaste for enforced silence that is carried forward into The Rain Ascends with a vengeance. In this later novel silence serves two functions: it first allows the bystanders to build their protective houses of cards, and second it protects the perpetrator to the extent that he can continue his activities pretty much unhindered. With the exception of Martin, The Rain Ascends acknowledges but does not examine the damage that may have been caused by the silence enforced on the victims.

In both novels there is an in-depth examination of the effect silence has on communication. In Obasan various interpretations of silence created perfectly legitimate reasons not to talk. Characters are careful not to add to the burden of another with words. Not speaking can also be a method of retaining one’s dignity. In the case of Naomi, the multitude of types of silence surrounding her make any sort of authentic communication difficult. This is apparent in the often hesitant nature of her narrative. And, of course, the ability to enforce silence allows people in power to use language to their
own best advantage. Silence in *The Rain Ascends* allows all of the characters to use language to build their own worlds in ways which they find acceptable. This, too, results in a hesitant narrative voice for Millicent. Her determined effort to get the story out often requires multiple tellings of the same story. In a postmodern vein, both protagonists are painfully aware of their inadequacies as narrators.
Conclusion

The study of four authors and several novels has definitely put the "possibilities" of silence to the test—many tests, in fact. In terms of a postmodern legacy there are a few similarities visible. The struggle between silence and language is by no means settled. Despite the different approaches of these authors to the struggle, there seems to be an agreement that the story itself remains of utmost importance. There is a general "tipping of the hat" to the problems involved in telling stories, but the urge towards absolute silence has not proven to be any sort of answer. On the other hand, attitudes towards deep silence are quite varied. In the end what is perhaps the most enduring aspect of postmodernism, as it appears in the texts I have studied, has already been quoted once: "Never again will a single story be told as though it were the only one" (John Berger, qtd. in In the Skin of a Lion).

The most obvious method of demonstrating this notion is through narrative voice. Again although each author has his or her own method, there is a heightened degree of awareness on the part of the narrator that the story being told is neither the only version nor the final authority. Not only is there a possibility of the existence of other equally true stories, there is also the possibility of human error on the part of the narrator. Joy Kogawa is the best example of this. Naomi in Obasan, despite Aunt Emily's encouragement to tell all, constantly doubts the accuracy of her own memories. She finally understands that she must come to terms with her own story, but her
method of telling never precludes the stories of others. In The Rain Ascends Millicent's reasons for doubting her own ability to tell the story are different. She knows that her position as "Hitler's cat" causes her view "from the milk bowl" to be biased. She wants desperately to include other versions. Nonetheless, the end result is the same; she must come to terms with her own story. In both cases, the narrators must learn to negotiate silence in order to tell their stories. The greatest difference between the two books is in the point of view of the narrator. In the first, Naomi is dealing with the story of a people wronged. In the second, Millicent is dealing with the story of a person who has done wrong.

Nicole Brossard's use of narrative voice shows the same awareness of a story being created, but she focuses on a different perspective. Rather than concentrating on the telling, she concentrates on the effects of the telling--how the creation of stories effects the real world. In Le Désert mauve the story is told and then, more or less, abandoned by the original teller, creating a silence of absence. The rest of the novel is devoted to the story's interpretation and translation by another. Even a single story can have multiple meanings, depending on the perception of the reader. In Baroque d'aube individual stories jostle for space to such a degree that telling can become an act of belligerence. Again the focus is on how they affect the real world. The biggest change from the first novel to the second is that in the first, from a highly feminist point of view, telling the story at all costs is what really matters. In the second, women have gained enough self-confidence within language to expect a certain
discrimination in the use of language and, perhaps therefore, a little more room for silence.

Michael Ondaatje’s use of narrative voice creates a sense of ambiguity in his work. The possibility of multiple stories in Coming Through Slaughter is emphasized by the constant switching of narrators. Everyone is given a chance to tell his or her own version of the story. This practice is given added credibility by the fact that a good portion of the novel consists of Webb’s efforts to track down Bolden’s story. An even more polished version of the same technique is found in The English Patient. There is, of course, the effort to track down the English patient’s story, but he is not the only one attempting to work through his or her story. A unique aspect of the narrative voice in both of these novels is the presence of a double narrator or shadow narrator. Behind the voice of the narrator that we actually hear is the suggestion of another, more omniscient narrator— one who knows not only what has happened but what will happen. We are given only brief moments of proof of his actual existence.

In the later novels of both Kogawa and Ondaatje a different sort of narrative technique has developed. There is a tendency to indulge in repeated tellings of a story before the whole story is revealed. The story generally starts with such a minimum of information that the reader does not give it much significance. However, with each telling a little more is revealed, and the story becomes more and more important and often more horrible. This accentuates not only the possibility of multiple versions of a story but, at the same time, the possibility of a faulty narrator. It also accentuates the way in which
a story can both be surrounded by silence and contain silence within its own gaps.

Of all the authors considered here Jacques Poulin is certainly the most traditional in terms of narrative and narrative voice. His novels are usually told either by third-person omniscient or first-person semi-omniscient narrators. The storyline is usually linear—moving from point A to point B in a coherent fashion. He relies on intertextuality in most of his novels to make the point about multiple versions of stories. Volkswagen Blues, in particular, makes the point strongly by including a character—La Grande Sauterelle—whose stories of history are diametrically opposed to those of the protagonist. Although Poulin and Brossard envision a literary collectivity, Brossard’s vision is of writers, while Poulin’s is more of the finished works. Poulin illustrates his vision through the totality of his actual work. Brossard, on the other hand, tackles the theory from within each work. From Volkswagen Blues to Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini, a world worth living in is one replete with books. Poulin is even at peace with the demise of his long standing author/protagonist, Jack Waterman (who is ironically fading into silence), so long as the health of the collectivity does not seem endangered.

I began this study quite sure that whatever challenges were being levelled against language and meta-narratives would not do any ultimate damage to the human desire to tell stories. There was already evidence that this desire was unshakable when I started. An unexpected realization that has arisen from studying these texts in detail is how basic a human impulse this desire is. In its origins it is not nearly
as complicated a desire as it has become in the theories and practice of contemporary literature. It is a simple urge to leave some sort of mark on the world—the "mark on the wall"—that proclaims one's existence. This activity ranges from the dolphin's identity whistles in Coming Through Slaughter to Poulin's complicated network of books, and it appears in some version in every novel examined here. In The English Patient the Englishman is torn between the fear of being identified and the fear that he will die with his stories left untold. Kirpal Singh learns a bitter lesson about trying to make any kind of mark in a culture that will not own him.

Le Désert mauve chronicles Laure's step out of silence to be initiated into language, a step she takes for the express purpose of recording her experiences. The mark she leaves is then picked up by another—Maude—and remade into her own. The plot of Baroque d'aube revolves around Occident's desire to leave her mark in the form of a book about her life's work as an oceanographer—the sea. Obasan's Aunt Emily has written a hefty document aimed at informing the world of the existence of Japanese-Canadians. Naomi is upset to learn that there is no trace left in Slocan of their lives there—as if they had never been there at all. The Rain Ascends is somewhat different in that Millicent wants her father's existence proclaimed, but only part of it. She seems to have no such desire for herself, although in many ways having children satisfies the same impulse: On the very last page she pictures "the child of [her] child" growing healthy and happy, heir to only the best of the legacy (217).

The responses to silence have been even more varied. With Ondaatje and Brossard the early novels definitely treated silence and
language as complete opposites. The protagonist could choose one or the other. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, Bolden starts out with all the language in the world and ultimately chooses silence. In *Le Désert mauve*, Laure starts out with access to silence and chooses language. These are both reactions to perceived flaws in language; the difference is that they come from different directions. Ondaatje’s response begins with a postmodern questioning of language that leaves silence as the only alternative. Brossard begins with a feminist distaste for silence that leaves language as the only alternative, whatever its flaws may be. Patriarchal language creates patriarchal reality. Women must win a place inside language in order to be visible in the “real” world. They have been the victims of enforced silence for too long to consider silence an option. She is also more influenced by post-structuralist theories, undoubtedly because Québec’s late entry into postmodernism left room for a certain amount of conflation between the two theories.

Despite their beginning from opposite ends of the field, both these authors, in their later novels, end up with, more or less, similar views of deep silence as a benevolent force. With *The English Patient* deep silence is a place of refuge and repair. Characters retreat into silence in order to come to terms with what they have been through. Unlike the earlier novel, *Coming Through Slaughter*, it is not a permanent condition. *Baroque d’aube*, on the other hand, provides a much more abstract representation of deep silence. Not only is there the sensation of a backdrop of silence behind the entire work, the silence occasionally becomes personified and steps out of the background. The surprise in this novel is the softening of the
strong stand taken against silence in the first text. Brossard is not only open to possible benefits, but worries that in a tumult of language they may be lost. Like in *The English Patient* there is less worry of being trapped inside deep silence.

Kogawa’s work provides the biggest surprise in the area of silence. *Obasan*, although it takes a firm stand against enforced silence, also illustrates the myriad positive perceptions of silence contained in Asian thought. Despite anger over the fact that an entire people has been silenced, there is no great backlash against other forms of silence themselves. There is a cultural understanding of the positive aspects of deep silence, which in this case has many subcategories, such as attentive silence described by King-Kok Cheung. Not only do the characters in this text have easier access to the benefits provided by deep silence, they actually need it in order to come to any sort of understanding of their own lives. The surprise then is in *The Rain Ascends*, which neither begins with nor arrives at such an understanding. Silence is seen at best as cowardly and at worst as an unspeakable evil. The family in this later novel seems to be white; they, therefore, do not have access to the cultural tradition that can make silence a position of strength. And apparently, Kogawa does not see much hope of extending Asian understanding to the West.

Poulin is again the most traditional of the group. His chief interest in silence is as a mystery—the unknown something that needs to be brought to light. His characters have a sense of deep silence but, perhaps because they are too well protected in their “psychic bubbles,” they are unable to have easy access to any other sort of
silence. In *Volkswagen Blues* Jack finally comes to the realization that some silences must be left in peace, but this does not prevent Poulin from mounting a new and ever more challenging mystery in each new novel. In true postmodern fashion the endings are left open to speculation. Only his latest novel, *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini*, allows the reader any sort of closure. In the final pages, the dilemma of Jack’s disease seems solved by Jim’s willingness to take up the torch.

Some of the other manifestations of silence are of interest in a comparative sense. With the exception of Buddy Bolden, all of the characters encountered are capable of surrounding themselves with a protective layer of personal silence. Not coincidently, the exception, Bolden, is one of the few to completely surrender himself to the absolute silence of mutism. The only other two characters to fall silent, Théo in *Volkswagen Blues* and Jack in *Les Yeux bleus de Mistassini*, do so because of disease not choice. Death as an absolute form of silence has the vague quality of a flirtation in most of these novels. The characters know it is there, but that is about all they care to know of it. *Obasan* is the only work to treat death as a silence of absence. This is because Naomi is unaware of her mother’s death and in denial about her father’s. A silence of absence, as already discussed, plays a large role in several other novels as well. This type of silence forces the characters taking active part in the narrative to fill in the story for themselves. Without exception, enforced silence is condemned. Groups that have been kept in the margins by such silence are extremely vigilant in this condemnation.
These groups include feminists, racial minorities and cultural minorities such as lesbians.

As for what has been retained from early postmodernism, the answers are still evolving. What is apparent at the present time is an extreme awareness that no story can be the "only" story. This awareness does indeed show in a less assured narrative voice than was evident in texts before postmodernism. Narrators are quite conscious of the possibility of their own fallibility and of the different light cast on their story by the stories of others. None of this, however, has troubled the concept of storytelling overmuch. Although telling a story may be done with a new sensitivity to its effects, the importance of the activity cannot be diminished. In the early stages of postmodernism, the extreme mistrust of the meta-narrative caused silence to be viewed as an alternative. The resulting tension between language and silence produced the radical, experimental narrative forms so conspicuous in the early work of postmodern writers such as Ondaatje. Although, as already stated, the tension still exists, silence is, in most cases, no longer considered the complete opposite of language. Silence can now be used in very subtle ways by writers who have learned all there is to learn from the early questioning and challenging of traditional forms. Writers have managed to incorporate a new theoretical sophistication in ways to tell stories again—or otherwise.
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