Joyce’s Silences Review

James Joyce’s Silences ed. by Jolanta Wawrzycka and Serenella Zanotti, London, Bloomsbury, 2018, pp. 255, £85 (hardback), ISBN: 9781350036710

*James Joyce’s Silences* is the first work of this size to be entirely devoted to the subject of silence in the author’s canon. Whilst editors Jolanta Wawrzycka and Serenella Zanotti acknowledge a certain debt owed to Jean-Michel Rabaté and Hugh Kenner, as Senn puts it “There is an inherent paradox in discussing silences since by definition they tend to be absences” (p. 13) which perhaps explains the lack of concerted effort on this topic. The collection of essays boasts a stellar Joycean line-up including: Sam Slote, Fritz Senn, John McCourt and the late Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli. This considerable list of contributors from across the spectrum of Joyce Studies ensures that whilst the text is focussed solely on one theme, it is largely successful in presenting a nuanced and complete understanding of the author’s use of “textual, rhetorical and aesthetic silences”. (p. 1)

The collection is divided into four parts, with part one focussing on the articulation of silence, part two on stylistic and aesthetic silences, part three on written silences and the Joycean meta-text, and part four on the silence of unacknowledged translation. These categories are an effective means of maintaining balance and focus, aside from the somewhat strange inclusion of Tim Conley’s ‘The Silence of the Looms: “Penelope” as Translation’ in part three and not part four.

It is with Senn that part one opens, with his essay an assessment of “how Joyce verbally acts [his silences] out”. (p. 13) In practice this becomes a principally a study of the shape of silence and noise in Joyce’s works, from *Dubliners* to *Ulysses*, tracking the variations from moments of calm, omission and ellipses, to various climaxes. Although Senn’s conclusions are not the most original, the essay is a concisely argued and sharp delineation of Joyce’s active use of silence to create atmosphere and develop character and skilful dialogue. Senn is perhaps hampered by an over-zealous use of subheadings.

More refreshing is Laura Pelaschiar’s contribution on ‘Joyce’s Art of Silence in *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*’. This essay begins with a tracking of the transformation of ‘The Sisters’ through Joyce’s extensive redrafting, paying particular attention to the story’s central “enigma” (as the critic puts it in p. 35) and the use of rhetorical silence in creating this mystery. Pelaschiar highlights that the absence of completed dialogue, and both question and answer, heightens the power of the mysterious atmosphere of ‘The Sisters’. Yet, this work is at its finest when it considers the various female silences within Joyce’s canon – principally *Dubliners*. Perlaschiar argues convincingly for silence strengthening the textual positions of female characters of ‘Clay,’ ‘Eveline,’ ‘The Boarding House,’ and ‘A Mother,’ drawing upon *Ulysses* for comparison. Pelachiar’s suggestion that verbal silence allows for a form of textual domination by the female psyche in both ‘Penelope’ and ‘Eveline’ is compelling, and unveils a new aspect of Joyce’s use of silence. Despite occasional missteps (the gendering of *Portrait* is a little suspect) Pelachiar navigates the difficult subject of Joyce’s female silences adeptly, and presents an original reading of “eloquent silence” (p. 47) with vibrancy.

Moving on to part two, McCourt, Teresa Caneda Cabrera, Slote and Morris Beja each providing quality criticism on the aesthetics of Joyce’s silences. Cabrera’s short effort on the aesthetics of silence in ‘The Dead,’ illustrating how Joyce uses broken articulation to draw focus upon the unsayable, is a small gem of scholarship which is successful in placing this story in a wider Irish culture of absence.

Yet it is McCourt that provides the highlight here, with an excellent essay assessing the relationship between silence and Joyce’s development of a style. McCourt skilfully provides an overview of the consistent appearance of silence alongside Joyce’s emerging writing technique, from *Stephen Hero* to *Ulysses*. The final few pages, with a focus on *Giacomo Joyce* as a visual object, reflective of the distinct silence found in this text that Joyce kept quiet (and its role as a crucial milestone in Joyce’s emerging style), are the strongest in the essay, and possibly in this section of the text as a whole.

Parts three and four offer more practical readings of Joyce’s silences, focusing on the Joycean the act of writing silence and translation respectively. Part three delves into study of Joycean meta-text, with the author’s letters, publisher archives and Homeric translation. Whilst this section perhaps lacks the textual excitement of the earlier parts, it does still provide points of academic interest that would reward further study. William Brockman’s essay on ‘The Silent Author of Joyce’s Dictated Letters’ which highlights the transformation of the letter to more than a two-way-correspondence, through the use of a scribe. This complicated question of authorship is given careful thought by Brockman – illustrating how the amanuensis themselves is a silent author, but also at times silences Joyce the author. Brockman’s short contribution spans decades in Joyce’s life, and certainly opens the possibility of more expansive work on this aspect of Joyce’s life and letters.

Part four tackles Joycean translation, a topic that has spawned many books of its own, and is perhaps a step too far for this collection. Nevertheless, there is work of value here, with the co-editor Wawrzycka’s effort on *Chamber Music* and translating silence a standout. This contribution is less an essay and more a report on the translator’s method, offering a fascinating insight into the difficulties of translation, and the care that must be taken with the linguistic facets of the expression of silence in Joyce’s poetry.

Readers of this collection are unlikely to be met with any great surprises, but will encounter a diverse, international and well-hewn scholarship which is testament to the ability of both the editors and contributors. The editors anticipate criticism that the expansive range of scholarly approaches make it difficult to “present silence as a unifying concept”. (p. 7) Yet, *James Joyce’s Silences* is a successful remedy to the previous lack of focussed text on this topic, with a broad analysis presenting the reader with a comprehensive understanding of Joyce’s moments of quiet.