

The Silence of the Poems

As I was reading today (at Starbucks), the idea came to me that the most important aspect of a poem is the silence contained in it and the silence in which the poem itself is contained. I think we make the mistake sometimes of believing that silence is an absence of sound, but silence, as I use it here, is an active and powerful presence.

The book of Genesis in the Bible tells a religious story of how everything came to be. It was into a dark, empty, silent void that the Creator spoke the first words – “Let there be light!” It is out of silence that the “muse” speak – “Let there be a poem!” or a novel, etc. The poem emerges out of silence and returns to silence. Silence is the womb in which all art begins its life and from which it is birthed into the world.

Within the body of the poem, silence is found between words, phrases, lines, and stanzas. It is how the poet and readers/listeners handle these pieces of silence that determines the poem’s parsimonious or generous style and its syntactical character, that is, how words, phrases, lines, stanzas cohere and interact with each other to create meaning.

For instance, while reading to others, one can pause to separate, join, or to emphasize ideas and images, etc. The silence of a pause can be particularly useful for subtly exposing the rhyming pattern, and before the final line or two, especially if they carry in them a surprise, a paradox, a conclusion, or an answer to a question raised in the poem.

As I suggested above, there is also that silence into which the poet utters “his” first words, out of which the whole poem arises and into which, in the end, it returns. When we speak our poem into the silence, I believe we share the creative character of the Creator and initiate a creative process.

It is said that “silence is golden.” If so, then surely the poems emerging from it are “golden” as well (or at least silver). Once you hear the silence of the poems, it speaks louder than any words!

Peace & Poetry,
John