

Silence and Sound in the Sentences of Gerald Murnane's *A Million Windows*

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In his 1986 essay 'Why I write what I write', Gerald Murnane underlines the importance of sound to his writing, and in particular the sound of sentences. He affirms that sentences have a sound shape that fits the contours of the thought that inhabits them, and further, that when the right sound shape is found it also involves the voice that is proper to the work, which, for Murnane, is the author's own authentic voice. He brings a number of writers and thinkers to his aid in fleshing out this idea: Hugh Kenner who spoke of the 'shape of meaning', Robert Frost, who spoke of 'the sound of sense' that is strung on a sentence, Robert Louis Stevenson who spoke of how sentences begin as knots that then clear and resolve themselves. Turning to rhythm he cites Herbert Read who states that rhythm aligns itself not with words but thought, with a proper sounding sentence fitting the contour of the thought. He then cites Virginia Woolf who also speaks of rhythm emerging as a 'sight, an emotion [that] creates this wave in the mind' which writing captures, again by linking words that fit the form of a thought to an existing sound form (Murnane, *Lilacs* 26-28).

Like Woolf, Murnane finds a relation between images and feelings and the sounds that house them, and also like Woolf, he composes this relation as a way of somehow coming to terms with these images and feelings. He states:

My sentences arise out of images and feelings that haunt me — not always painfully; sometimes quite pleasantly. These images and feelings haunt me until I find the sentences to bring them into this world.
(Murnane, *Lilacs* 28).

Murnane's most recent novel, *A Million Windows*, might be read as a meditation on the relation between sound and silence.

Murnane's work in general has received a deal of critical attention, and this has extended in recent times to a consideration of the philosophical implications of his work (see Murphy, West) and his place in the national and transnational space of Australian fiction, given the small but growing international interest in his works (Coetzee, Genoni). So too, while it has only recently been published a number of extended reviews have been dedicated to *A Million Windows* and aspects of its compelling complexity both in Australia (Stinton) and internationally (see Kahn, Wood). Yet, anxiety still exists within the field of Australian literature as to Murnane's status. I contend this novel clarifies how and why the Murnane's later work is important and adds new depth to early work. That is, this novel challenges the reading offered by Gelder and Salzman, which considers the later works to be impoverished in comparison to *The Plains* (131-132). Their claim that the later work (which, given the limits of their time frame does not include Murnane's works after *Emerald Blue*) 'depicts women as rather old-fashioned Muses, empty vessels waiting to be filled by male desire; or his sense of landscape as somehow virginal' (132) is refuted by the substance of *A Million Windows*, as I hope to set out here.

At the heart of the novel, though only revealed at the end, is a secret that has long been held in silence in the narrator's family and only recently revealed to him. Indeed, it seems a major revelation, one that has not appeared before in his fiction, which is unusual for a writer like Murnane, who constantly returns to the same themes and ideas. While the idea of sound is linked to topics concerned with the nature of fiction and the kind of fictional narration preferred by the narrator of the novel, the idea of silence is paired with the reiterated motif of the nervous breakdown. One breaks down into silence or because of silence. One addresses, resolves, or stops the breakdown by finding the right sentences. Tying these opposites together are images and feelings related to meaning. These feelings in turn are not found so much in the actual entities encountered in life, in the realm of the visible or actual, but through the manner in which these entities are made to appear in the realm of the invisible or fictional: a realm of perfectly contoured sounds carrying thoughts that do justice to the feelings of understanding that are conveyed in the images.

The process is a highly complex one, and it is not easy to do it justice. The work asks a good deal of its readers, requiring them to piece together elements that are conveyed in sections that interact through patterns of connections rather than through a clear narrative line. It is necessary, then, to attempt to trace some of these connections by paying close attention to the work.

In the ninth section of the thirty-four sections of *A Million Windows*, which treats the topic of 'the subject matter of a work of true fiction', Murnane's narrator outlines the understanding of the nature of meaning in fiction held to by the fiction writing 'personage' of the novel. The narrator states:

What others might have called *meaning* he called *connectedness*, and he trusted that he would one day see (revelation being for him always a visual matter) among the multitudes of details that he thought of as his life or as his experience faint lines seeming to link what he had never previously thought of as being linked and the emergence of a rudimentary pattern, which word had always been one of his favourites. (Murnane, *Windows* 37)

Section nine considers the long series of female faces to which the personage has been drawn throughout his life: a series of dark-haired females around which fine patterns of connectedness coalesce. In the twenty-fourth section of the book, the narrator, who is also one of the writers being described, returns to the question of meaning or connectedness and how it relates to the series of dark-haired women. The section considers how a group of similar writers imagined to haunt windowed rooms in a corridor of the house of writing, a building of two or three stories looking out across plains stretching to the horizon, have all fallen in love with fictional female personages. Yet one, in particular, has had: 'the experience of falling in love with an entity, so to call her, who was both an actual female person, [...] and also a seeming likeness [...] of a personage who had first appeared to him nearly ten years before while he was reading a work of non-fiction' (141). Yet this is not all, as the dual personage becomes triple given that the writer was also involving her in a work of fiction he was then writing.

There is a complex involvement, then, in the patterns of connectedness between what the narrator calls ‘the visible’ and others might call the real, and what he calls ‘the invisible’, which others might call the fictional realm. In section twenty-four the actual person the writer falls in love with is a lecturer in English whom he meets at an Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference in Tasmania; she is also a Hungarian girl pursued by a rapist who is described in a work of non-fiction leaping to her death into a well among the plains on a remote farming estate; she is also a character in a novel not unlike Gerald Murnane’s novel *Inland*.

While these connections between life and writing occur the writer described in section twenty-four does not include this connection in his fiction; rather, he attempts to come to terms with it in a long letter he addresses to the actual woman who has returned from Tasmania to the mainland. The narrator explains:

The author of the letter that might be called a work of fiction avoids using the word *coincidence*. He claims that a person who writes fiction of meaning and who reads such fiction with discernment is able to recognise that the details of what we call our lives go sometimes to form patterns of meaning not unlike those to be found in our preferred sort of fiction. (Murnane, *Windows* 146)

An exchange between the visible and the invisible is forcefully asserted and is felt to be meaning itself: the sense of meaning that emerges as topics, motifs and images resolve themselves into patterns with sentence sounds that at once ask to be understood and provide a means of understanding.

A Million Windows has an unusual structure, like much of the work Murnane has composed since he returned from a silence that extended for almost 14 years between *Emerald Blue* (1995) and *Barley Patch* (2009). He describes this silence and how it came about in *Barley Patch*, a novel built around the twin questions as to why he had written and why he had stopped writing. The crisis also serves as a background to *Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs*, a collection of essays that attends closely to and serves in part to explain Murnane’s fictional motivations and methods. Clearly, some sort of crisis took place while writing an unfinished novel, *O, Dem Golden Slippers*, which caused Murnane to abandon that novel. A kind of breakdown, at least of artistic method, of that motivation that forces a writer to write, was involved. Murnane discusses this directly in his essay ‘The Breathing Author’, though he leaves it opaque: it is a matter of a particular set of images and the understanding they produce that disturbs him. Having understood this connection of images and feelings he now no longer needs to write (Murnane, *Lilacs* 183-184). He states:

My writing was not an attempt to produce something called ‘literature’ but an attempt to discover meaning. Why should I feel surprise or disappointment if the result of my writing seven books of fiction was my discovery of something of much meaning to myself and my deciding that the writing of fiction was no longer of much importance to me? (Murnane, *Lilacs* 185)

So in the midst of a period of silence — the period from 1995 to 2009 when he published no fiction — he claims to have found meaning through the right sentence

sounds and that there is nothing now for fiction but silence. Yet, as we have seen he later returns to and circles the crisis itself in *Barley Patch*. He then moves on to *A History of Books*, making use of a new fragmented form.

We are left with a question then. Was the silence the result of a resolution of meaning, or was it a symptom of some other kind of crisis? Is the sign of silence a sign of full meaning or a sign of complete breakdown? Murnane has built a detailed archive related to his life and work and claims that this will reveal much that he leaves otherwise opaque. He explains these archives in his essay 'The Breathing Author'. He states:

I have written detailed reports for scholars of the future, if there be any such. I have stored these reports in what I like to call my archives. [...] When my annotating is completed, my collected papers will comprise a remarkably detailed documentation of my life and my thinking. However, so candid is this documentation that my papers will not be available to the curious or the scholarly reader until several persons apart from myself have died. (Murnane, *Lilacs* 185-186)

In 2013 Murnane published extracts of listings related to materials held in these extensive archives, in the American journal *Music & Literature* and I will return below to one item set out there. The archives form part of a larger work, which in turn involves patterns and themes that link the visible and invisible, the real and the imagined. For the moment, however, it seems that the need to attempt to discover meaning has returned notwithstanding the contents of the archive.

Early in *A Million Windows* the narrator speaks favourably of those theorists of writing practice who talk of 'double voiced discourse' in fiction: that is, who underline how more than one voice can be speaking at the same time; for example, the voice of a narrator and a character. Such double voicing makes humour and pathos possible at the same time. It also serves to multiply the agents within the work, and this seems part of the idea behind the corridor in *A Million Windows* where the narrator works with other writers. These others seem much like him, even different versions of the same self. This is something Murnane has explored before, most notably in *Inland*. On one level, then, one is encouraged, both by the text, and by the author 'Gerald Murnane' himself, who promotes the idea in advertising his archive, to identify all of his fiction with elements of real events that have occurred in the life of the real Gerald Murnane. On another level the works themselves insist on various layers of selves or personages or narrators, who act in the place of 'Gerald Murnane' but can never be absolutely identified with him. This becomes a matter for humour here, as these various avatars meet and drink in the common room of the corridor they inhabit in the house of writing.

A Million Windows involves a fragmented structure. It is a work of 34 sections (although in the first edition one of these section markings has been left off in error: it should occur on page 163 prior to a long quotation). The narrator draws attention to the sections, referring to them in section nineteen and section thirty-one by their numbers. Each section is organised around a topic, often related to the nature of writing and techniques of writing practice, which serve to reveal, bit by bit, the narrator's own 'policy' regarding fiction. For the narrator fiction should be indirect,

making use of reported speech rather than dialogue, recounted by a narrator who is at once a first person and third person narrator. Yet these theoretical relations themselves quickly become the substance of fiction with the writing process itself staging a story of unrequited signification. The (male) narrator should be reliable, and serve to affirm a trustworthiness worthy of a (female) reader who must be discerning and herself trustworthy. Behind all this, however, the reliability of even those dearest to one is necessarily called into question, and the work bears witness with regret to how any and every reader will become undiscerning, or will at times simply fail to understand.

The process of understanding, however, clearly involves the attempt to find patterns of connectedness and these patterns emerge through the form, the topics addressed, and motifs and images that recur. Yet errors in tracing these patterns are always possible. I wondered if the number 34 was significant and thought of Dante, whose *Inferno* has 34 cantos and whose *La Vita Nuova* mixes an understanding of artistic practice with the figure of Beatrice, the glorious lady of his mind, whose existence mixed the visible with the invisible. The number nine is crucial to Dante's idea of Beatrice and in section nine of *A Million Windows* the narrator encounters his first dark-haired girl, who is aged eight, the same age as Beatrice when Dante first encountered her. Yet the links remain tenuous. While Murnane has berated his critics for failing to recognise the intertextual references he makes, it is often difficult to affirm such connections without the direct help of the author either within or external to the text.

A Million Windows does make some clear intertextual references: Henry James is mentioned throughout and his methods as a 'champion narrator' embody the attributes most admired by Murnane's narrator. The book begins with an epigraph from James' New York edition preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* and takes its title from this: 'The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million...' (James 7). The first section ends with another quotation, which is identified with the first sentence written by the writer protagonist, "All our troubles arise from our being unwilling to keep to our room" (Murnane, *Windows* 1). This sentence paraphrases Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, where Pascal states, "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (Pascal 37).

The first section and the thirty-fourth section of the work concern writers in their rooms, with their windows closed behind single holland blinds. The first imagines the writer within his room writing his sentence. The thirty-fourth imagines a first person narrator looking up at the blinded window from the maze within the garden below, a maze elsewhere associated with the nature of fictional form, and failing to adequately imagine the author who writes behind the window within the room. Both James and Pascal also talk of rooms. In his preface James describes working on his novel in Venice with the buzz and life of the city outside his window offering a distraction that did not directly speak to the work he was composing. He then moves inward in discussing the methods of the Russian novelist Turgenev, who, like Murnane and James, sees the invisible protagonists in his novels as having some measure of existence that he needs to realise by involving them in relations that best bring their natures to light (James 7-12). The quotation from Pascal comes from a section on 'diversion' in the *Pensées* which underlines how it is human nature to seek to be distracted from the poverty of the human condition with the uncertainties and

suffering it carries (Pascal 37). The room, then, presupposes what is outside it, either in actual or imagined entities.

Yet rather than other texts providing keys to his own, the feeling that dominates in reading Murnane is that meaning or connectedness is built from within, on the particular terms defined by his own works. Here there are topics, motifs and images. The topics generally concern the writing process and how it relates to meaning found through relations with others (and for the male narrator, with women in particular). These topics turn obsessively around the ideas of reliability and unreliability, of truth and falsity, of the direct and the indirect. Theories of writing emerge which speak to recurring patterns of narrative practice, and, most significantly, argue that stories either involve relations among family or relations with others, with the former 'vertical' relations asserted to be more prevalent than the latter 'horizontal' relations (154-155).

The recurring motifs generally concern the narrator's family and especially the mother, the series of dark-haired women the narrator protagonist admires, and the process of writing fiction. Yet there are other more troubling motifs linked to sound and silence: a loud drunkenness both indoors among the writers and outdoors, the silence of sexual abuse and emotional abuse, and above all the silence of the nervous breakdown. The images include a room where one writes in silence, a corridor and common room where one noisily meets and even carouses with one's fellows, a house of two or three stories which houses them all and the windows looking out over a garden maze and plains. An answering image is clearly drawn from the work of Hal Porter's autobiography *The Watcher on the Cast-Iron Balcony*, because while neither Porter nor the title of his book are named the phrase which describes light hitting 'sumless distant windows like spots of golden oil' is directly drawn from this work by this writer (Porter 12).

As one looks closer it is apparent that the topics, motifs and images resolve into patterns built around sound and silence. If Gerald Murnane's *Tamarisk Row* is a novel in large part about the son's relations with the father, then *A Million Windows* concerns the son's 'difficult' relations with his mother. A secret, held in silence, is hidden behind this difficult relationship, one that is associated with the nervous breakdown or series of nervous breakdowns of the son. The nervous breakdowns link to silence and so he seeks a way of stopping the breakdowns either through the words of fiction (finding the book that will stop the breakdown) or through the warmth of relations with women (finding the woman who will stop the breakdown). While the narrator protagonist finds the right book — *The Tin Drum*: a novel concerning difficult or unusual relations between a son and a mother and a son and a fatherland — this novel is no longer the narrator's ideal. While the narrator protagonist finds the right woman she plays no part in his fiction. That is, Murnane's late wife occupies the filing cabinets in the archives full of other writing that concern family, about which the fiction will remain silent. Instead he creates sentence sounds related to the image ideals of the series of dark-haired women of his fictions.

The theme of silence and sound returns in an important section of the book in which the narrator protagonist describes his relationship with a particular dark-haired young woman whom he meets on train that he takes each day to school when they are both fifteen years of age. They converse in silence, through the barest of signals: glances

that meet and recoil for the most part. At last he offers her a sign by making his name visible to her on the front of a book he carries and she replies immediately by making hers visible to him, though he misreads it. At last they converse and it appears they might become a true girlfriend and boyfriend, yet he prefers the idea of her, which he connects to the misread name 'Dathar', to the real woman, connected to her true name 'Darlene'. In consequence he cuts off their relationship in silence, deliberately taking a different train in order to miss her in the future. He later reads a response to a note – the note itself is not published – by an agony aunt in the local newspaper. The agony aunt berates a young man, much like himself, for having acted just as he has acted, and this causes him regret and shame, no doubt because the sense that he has betrayed her becomes more acute, but mostly because he becomes aware that Darlene has not understood him or his true motivations. There is a complex logic of indirection involved then. The signs, even when they are re-imagined in well-formed sentence sounds circle and miss what might be a clear direct meaning. Silence and sound somehow infect one another and render the order of meaning deviously complex. It involves at once pathos and humour.

The topic of the unreliable narrator is linked to the motif of the mother and the motif of the nervous breakdown and a double voicing that involves both saying and not saying something, both sound and silence. Early in the book the narrator tells us that his mother, who somehow discovers his infatuation with the first dark-haired girl when he is eight and spreads the news of this to other women she knows, is not to be trusted (Murnane, *Windows* 44). Later, having experienced or somehow avoided a series of nervous breakdowns, the protagonist visits a psychiatrist. Recognising that the psychiatrist is predisposed to an Oedipal understanding of the underpinnings of his problems the protagonist adopts a strategy whereby he acts as an unreliable narrator, composing an insincere letter to his mother that seeks to clear the air with her and get to the heart of the problems that stem from his difficult relations with her. The mother composes a plausible, but he feels, equally unreliable response that serves to convince the psychiatrist that a resolution to the problems has been achieved (Murnane, *Windows* 122-126). Earlier, the narrator offers a different storyline, one that encompasses the principles of true fiction. In section eighteen he recounts the story he had read in *The Australian Journal*, of a hobo in the Great Depression who had become homeless due to difficulties with his mother. The hobo plans to jump a freight train and does so moments after befriending a dog, but watches in dismay as the dog seeks out his gaze, the gaze of the only one who has offered it any empathy, as he speeds away on the train leaving the dog behind. So too, in some sense without a home due to his own difficulties with his mother, the narrator is touched by the gaze of a small girl playing an imaginary game with her brother in her front yard. She is the only one ever to seem to allow him into the invisible world of her imagination (Murnane, *Windows* 115-119).

Here the patterns become still more troubling, as a motif of emotional and sexual abuse emerges. The dim outlines of this might be seen with the recurring references, through an image of a drunk writer killed by a car in a provincial Victorian city, and the aforementioned image of windows like drops of golden oil, to Hal Porter who had paedophilic tendencies (see Rowe). As we have seen the discussion of fictional form asserts the importance of vertical stories, or those related to the family, over horizontal stories, or those related to others. The narrator recounts a game of sexual fantasy in which he counts the letters of words to determine a range of possible

outcomes and this game ‘has for its chief characters what seems to be a fictional version of the author of the game as a young man, hardly more than a boy, and one or more dark-haired young women, hardly more than girls, who are his cousins’ (Murnane, *Windows* 174). He likewise describes memories of sexual awakening in which he is punished by stern faced dark-haired maternal aunts for exposing himself as a boy to his dark-haired girl cousins (Murnane, *Windows* 174-175). In contrast, he talks of his paternal aunts and uncle who have seemingly overcome all sexual urges by killing off any need to love, replacing these desires with a deprecatory wit that focuses on those who have not made this break, but which is clearly founded on a deep fear of possible breakdown and a deep silence about their own desire (Murnane, *Windows* 158-160). Silence, then, haunts the breakdown: it is at its centre and is in part its cause.

At last, in the penultimate section, two interrelated stories are narrated. In the first, the protagonist is visited by a half-brother of whose existence he had previously been unaware. The half-brother wants to discover why his mother, who is the same mother as that of the protagonist narrator, abandoned him to care as a newborn. The half-brother recounts how he had made contact with his mother and had written the kind of message to her that every piece of writing penned by the narrator/protagonist seems to be: a letter seeking understanding from a boy-man addressed to a dark-haired girl woman who holds the promise of empathetic understanding. The once dark-haired woman, who had once been his mother, and is now dead, had sent a reply via a lawyer insisting the half-brother never contact her again, a letter which resulted in the nervous breakdown of the half-brother. Later in this section the protagonist seeks to discover, from the only still living maternal aunt, what she knows of the story of the half-brother. She reveals that the true father of the abandoned child was the stepfather of his mother, who had raped her (Murnane, *Windows* 186-191).

As stated above, in 2013 Murnane published extracts of listings related to materials held in his extensive archives in *Music & Literature*. One item revealed there is of particular interest. The description of the contents of a file in the archives states:

* notes and letters reporting in detail Gerald Murnane’s discovering during his sixty-ninth year that he was born out of wedlock and that he has an older half-brother who might well have been conceived as a result of GM’s mother’s having been raped during her seventeenth year by her fifty-five years old stepfather [<http://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2013/11/11/the-three-archives-of-gerald-murnane>]

This description is left for us to find on the internet page of *Music & Literature*, and not within the printed pages of the journal. Once found the image from life resonates with the images from the worlds of fiction in unexpected ways. What is revealed is not revealed in the sentences: the utterly crafted sentence sounds of the work of fiction *A Million Windows*, or the casual note scribbled on the outside of a file as if it were simply one entry among others. Rather, it is revealed between them. Yet now what has opened between the two realms — the ‘invisible’ fictitious realm and the ‘visible’ real — is the sound of resonance, the very resonance of silence, or the unspeakable.

A new image emerges towards the end of the novel: the image of a house in the midst of a forest in which the abuse takes place. An isolated house in which a young girl is abandoned by her own mother to the fate of rape at the hands of her stepfather. The house looking out through sunless windows over plains now takes on a new sense. It seeks a truth that wants to see to the horizon. It is a truth that had hardly been aware before of forests now erased from the landscape and the awfulness of deeds remaining in what is invisible but endures in the mind, because at last sentence sounds have formed to confront what had once merely been an engulfing silence.

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