
The Silence of Mihai Eminescu's Poems

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Abstract: *Silence could be presence, plenitude, repose but also absence, wordlessness. The present study explores these two (semantic) dimensions of silence as they are configured in Mihai Eminescu's poetry. The harmonious nature and the feminine presence create the predilect atmosphere for the reverberations of silence as repose and plenitude. When the poet encounters difficulties in finding the right verbum, silence reflects the Orphic crisis of the poetic word. The poet is tempted to test the possibilities of the poetic verbum and tries the impossible i.e. forces the limits of the word in order to make it incorporate the reality itself, not just to denominate it.*

Key words: *silence, absence, plenitude, limits of language, Orphic temptations*

A short look at the series of the synonyms for the word *silence* (quietude, tranquillity, noiselessness, soundlessness, peace) sets up several directions of study for the present research on Mihai Eminescu's poetry. The sememes *silence* encompasses might be separated into different semantic areas: one referring to an absence (of sounds, of words) and it includes synonyms such as noiselessness, soundlessness, other referring to a plain presence (of serenity, harmony, recumbency) and it includes synonyms such as peace, tranquillity. Some other semantic areas of *silence* are narrower. For instance, the synonym *quietude* mostly expresses wordlessness, interfering with the semantic area of *soundlessness* with which shares the sememe *absence*.

Nevertheless, silence as *quietude* detains the sememe of *presence* too.

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The dispute is as old as our world is, literally speaking. At the beginning of the world there was silence counterpointed by the ontogenetic Word, the *Logos*. Max Picard (1) defines silence as presence, plenitude, "Pure Being" which "contains everything within itself", representing "the firstborn of the basic phenomena". In relation to *Logos*, Picard (6-8) explains silence as an inform magma of potentialities where "everything is possible to begin", including Speech whose origin silence is. As Picard puts it, Speech is not the enemy of silence, but "the reverse of silence" (11), therefore any word contains a pinch of the gestational, maternal silence it came from: "There is something silent in every word as an abiding token of the origin of speech." (Picard, 8-9: 1964)

The Romantics drew on this hereditament of the poetic words, willing to recuperate the universal language of the origins, the divine *verbum* through their own poetic force. Only the poet is meant to imitate it, to reconstitute the initial unity between symbol and reality, between signifier and signified as the mission of the poetry is to recreate the first language, to totally restore the revelational contemplation and primary presence of things (Beguin, 93).

In this respect, poetry as the single vehicle for the initial silence, as repertoire for *Logos*, was often compared to mystical experiences as experiences of sacred unity. Though both the mystic and the poet aspire to osmosis with the divine, between the poet and the divine there is the phenomenal world (Bădescu, 20) from which the poet cannot separate himself if he wants to stay a poet (Raymond, 37: 1998). Therefore, through a mystic experience, the ego and the divine become one, beyond the conceptual, in the metaphysics of silence. The poet hoped for such a silence beyond the word and the image (Beguin, 165), beyond the intellectual and imagination. Henri Bremond (16: 1926) called such a poetry *pure poetry*. This purpose of reiterating the mythical function of poetic speech and, also, its impossibility to simultaneously exist as signifier and signified, to denominate and to exist (in real (f)act) generated, in modern times, a crisis in language that resorted to silence. This time, silence is reflecting absence, crisis, and the limits of language modern poets tested through deconstruction, voluntary ambiguation and objectification.

Silence as both presence and absence reopens the discussion regarding Eminescu's poetry. What is silence for such sonorous poetry, deeply laved into prodigious auditive imagery as Eminescu's? What is silence for such a being as the poet *per se* whose ontological estate presumes speaking, not being silent at all?

The following section of the present essay will try to give an answer to the first question and it draws on silence as presence,

fulfilment, and whole serenity, peace within and through poetry as catalyser of primordial silence (as Picard understands it).

Eminescu's poems agglomerate hums, murmurs, rustlings, echoes, *doina*, whispers. This is why one could hardly consider silence as the finality of such sonorous poems. Nevertheless, this abundant auditive imagery not only that induces peacefulness (silence) but also creates peacefulness. No one could perceive this subtle music, the whisper or the murmur but in silence. Reading Eminescu's poems in search for silence, one could surprisingly find oneself in an estate of silence, not necessarily because of the conceptualization of silence, but as a direct effect of this rich auditive imagery that parades *en sourdine*. In music, the *sourdine*, also called "mute", is a device that alters the sound in the sense that it softens it or reduces it to silence. No discordant, strident sounds in Eminescu's poems, but a soothing sounding through which primary silence reverberates.

Most of the poems that express such silence as plenitude always suggest that nature is a reiterated paradise. In *Blue Flower (Floare Albastră)*, the lover is invoked into an Eden where the forest, the springs which "in the valley weep" and the lake, "the placid reed" (tr. by D. Cuclin, 21: 2000), the moon and the stars recreate the plenitude of silence through their low voice sounding.

In fact, not only through sounds (auditive imagery), but also through the presence of nature in his poems, the primary silence is restored. As Picard (130: 1964) asserts: "The things of nature are images of the silence, exhibiting not themselves so much as the silence, like signs pointing to the place where silence is." For Picard, the lake is "like a seal stamped by silence on the face of the earth" and the forest is a "great reservoir of silence" (131-132). For Eminescu, the lake is the mirror that reflects the endless serenity of the sky and the forest ("those woodlands are our bliss", *Blue Flower*) always soothes the lover's soul, the poet's inner tremble. In *O remain, dear one* (tr. by C. M. Popescu, 40) the forest, like a mother, calms the poet and teaches him the lessons of nature:

"Stay with me in my fair land,
For your dreams and your longings
Only I can understand." (...)
"I will make you hear in secret
How the furtive chamois pass."

This secret sound of the furtive chamois is, in fact, the paradisiacal silence, the primary harmony. In *Călin (fragments from a tale)* (tr. by Leon Levitchi, 87), two verses, reminding us of Baudelaire's forest of symbols, express the plenitude of primordial silence:

“One would think the trunks eternal hide some souls beneath their bark
And they moan among the branches, and the branches, spell-bound, hark.”

Actually, the poet wants to hear the inaudible, to guess the mysterious core of the sound/ word which is, as a token (in Picard's expressions), silence. It is not surprising that Egdar Papu named Eminescu “the evocative poet of the great *Non-hearing* that bathes the secrets of the universe” (50). In order to create an extraordinary imagery, the poet changed his poetic sight and hearing in such a way as to be able to perceive the unperceivable that we identify as silence. Such a process of transfiguration of senses can be seen later on, in Nichita Stănescu's poetry.

In an essay dedicated to Eminescu's writings and their imagery, Dan C. Mihăilescu analyses the power of the hearing, of visage and of the tactile. The critic (34-39: 2006) writes about the purification and the protection of the senses as an important condition for the act of thinking in Eminescu's poems. The mind recovers its *hesychia*, its tranquillity, its silence through the transfiguration of the senses. Particularly, this is how the critic explains the low sound that goes through the poetic universe in Eminescu's poems. Recalling Novalis's famous saying, Mihăilescu refers to closing the outside hearing in order to open the inside hearing which permits the purity of the meditation. In front of nature as a source of peace, meditation turns into reverie, a deepening into the mysterious silence of nature. Nature, as always for romantics, is one of the best refuges where to regain the initial estate of harmony through long sessions of reverie.

Furthermore, referring to Jung's concepts *animus* and *anima*, Bachelard identified the silence in the peacefulness of the reverie as a manifestation of the *anima*. In his study on the poetics of reverie, the French philosopher explains the daydreaming as the repose of the feminine/ within the feminine:

«Disons donc que pour nous, en gros, le rêve relève de l'*animus* et la rêverie de l'*anima*. La rêverie sans drame, sans événement, sans histoire nous donne le véritable repos, le repos du féminin. Nous y gagnons la douceur de vivre. Douceur, lenteur, paix, telle est la devise de la rêverie en *anima*. C'est dans la rêverie qu'on peut trouver les éléments fondamentaux pour une philosophie du repos. » (28)

The estate of the reverie represents the peace and serenity of the poet

who plunges into an atmosphere of silence that he overspreads throughout his poetry as the essence of his communicative flux: «Sa rêverie est sa vie silencieuse. C'est cette paix silencieuse que veut nous communiquer le poète.» (Bachelard, 52) Nevertheless, the effect of the poem is bidirectional. Not only has the reader got into an estate of silence, but the poet also finds out recumbency in his poetic words: «Se reposer au cœur des mots, voir clair dans la cellule d'un mot, sentir que le mot est un germe de vie, une aube croissante» (Bachelard, 55)

Is there such a respite in Eminescu's poems? We may identify it in the serenity of the reveries, always correlated with nature or with the feminine presence. Regarding nature, we already identified its *silent* echoes. The feminine, however, generates another type of silence, still in the semantic area of *presence*, but essentially different from the one that crosses the natural.

In this point, it is important to repeat Bachelard's ideas regarding the connections he sees between the reverie and the feminine/ *anima* as a part of the Psyche. Reverie means repose within the feminine/ within the spiritual dimension of *anima* which operates with images/ imagination. Frequently, in Mihai Eminescu's poems, the angelic mistress's presence tempers the torment and enlightens with a benefic aura the whole atmosphere. Literally, the feminine energy brings peacefulness and serenity, restoring the harmonious paradisiacal unity of the couple. In *Angel and Demon* (tr. by Corneliu M. Popescu 72), *anima* means balm and silence, tranquillity and repose:

“But into that narrow tawdry room, breaking the mist that veiled his eye,
A silver shadow softly creeps; behold, an angel shape comes near,
Sits lightly on the wretched bed, kisses away each blinding tear
From those dimmed eyes; and now the mist is torn away in ecstasy.”
Aye, it is She. And with what joy, joy fathomless, before unknown,
He gazes in his angel's face and reads love's tender pity there.
With long glance he is repaid all his life's anguish and despair.
He whispers with his dying breath "My love I know thee for my own.”

Love is a positive energy that installs peacefulness and banishes the poetic restlessness. But the poet's immersion into silence is preceded by the long glance that: “repaid all his life's anguish and despair.” This secret flux of silence develops through sight and hearing. In Eminescu's poems sight has been always analyzed by literary critics as being a predilect means for expressing love through silent communication. There is too much and too intense to express in order to use words.

Seeing the other is far more inclusive than verbal speaking because silence completely fills the gap between the lovers and is able to deliver superabundant messages. In other texts, because of this superabundance, the lover covers his eyes in the presence of the mistress and cannot utter a word:

“Before your soft reproach my words dried on my tongue.
I strove to make an answer, but could no answer find.
Would earth have swallowed me, and left no trace behind,
My hands before my face I put my shame to blind,
And tears came to the eyes where tears had never sprung.”
(*Ghosts* tr. by Leon Levitchi, 137)

This *silentio stampa* reveals an overwhelming feeling where the ego feels totally absorbed. In an estate of contemplation, the poet remains mute. The word cannot be created, the poet and his poetry freeze in silence. Thus silence does not mean an heavy absence (of words) but the plenitude given by the ecstasy and deepening into reverie. *Călin (fragments from a tale)* (tr. by Leon Levițchi, 75-81; 2000) is even more suggestive for our direction of interpretation.

“And her beauty’s charms, so naked that his senses
Scarcely find a place to linger in the chambers of his thought”

The beauty unwrapping itself in front of the lover’s eyes cannot be conceptualised “in the chambers of his thought” as long as imagery/ imagination prioritarilly appeals to the spiritual dimension of *anima*. Only giving himself over to reverie the poet could relate to beauty. Not even words could comprise the absolute beauty:

“I feel happy beyond measure, for I like one tongue-tied,
Fail to tell how dear I hold thee, how I want thee for a bride
They would speak instead of whisp’ring, but know not where to
begin,
For a mouth closes the other when the other one drinks in; ”

Love and beauty exists to the full, *in the object*, and it does not need any concepts or denominations, therefore no word could express such a blessed inner estate. Nevertheless, imagery can translate these feelings into silence. The only communicator is, again, the sight which does not need any word, but the daydream. “And their eyes alone are talking, for their tongues have been struck dumb.” The squelch of poetic language in front of Beauty itself anticipates the mallarméan silence. Hugo Friederich (79) explained that the French poet “pushed his creation till

the moment when it suspends itself, till its end.” The different Orpheus’s hypostases in Eminescu’s poetry could lead us, at some point, to similar conclusions. Oftenly, the poet feels as a defeated Orpheus who can no longer play the chords; he is absorbed in contemplation (like in *Odin and the Poet*) or he is confronted with the limits of language. In this last matter, silence is not a presence anymore, but an absence, a crisis of the poetic *verbum*.

The next section of the present essay will try to formulate a response to the second question and it draws on silence as absence. Firstly, we turn to Gaston Bachelard who considers concepts and images as two irreconcilable poles. Concepts and intellectual effort towards knowledge belong to *animus*, to the masculine; imagery belongs to *anima*, to the feminine. Concepts and images develop on two divergent spiritual directions and they cannot function through interfering as they exclude each other:

«Ainsi, images et concepts se forment à ces deux pôles opposés de l'activité psychique que sont l'imagination et la raison. Joue entre elles une polarité d'exclusion. Rien de commun avec les pôles -du magnétisme. Ici les pôles opposés ne s'attirent pas ; ils se repoussent. Il faut aimer les puissances psychiques de deux amours différentes si l'on aime les concepts et les images, les pôles masculin et féminin de la Psyché.» (Bachelard, 62:)

In Bachelard’s terms, the imagery, as the predilect material of poetry, has a different source in the double-dimensional Psyche *i.e. anima* as repose and peacefulness. In other words, imagery, reverie, femininity, *anima* are synonyms for silence, repose, peacefulness. Eminescu’s poetic ego finds his serenity in Poesis. However, *Poesis* certainly also implies conceptualisation, thought and wordy forms. This tension between image and concept, between abundant content and form as a Dionysian – Apollonian dominant, puts under question the poem itself as in *With daydreams and with images*:

“Lacking both learnings and maxims
Fantasy without form, just whims,
In wandered lost, oh!then it came:
Thoughts are obscure and verse lame.”
(tr. by Kurt W. Treptow, 115)

Eminescu seldom wonders about the right poetic form to capture the essence and truth, the very core of things: “How should man find true expression/To describe his teeming soul?” (*To the Critics*, tr. by

Corneliu M. Popescu, 187) but the doubt regarding the potentialities of poetic language will soon generate a crisis of the poetic ego. The image of the defeated Orpheus is recurrent in Eminescu's poems. The harp is silent, the poet does not create anymore, deepening himself into silence. One of the most suggestive poems, in this respect, is *Satire IV* (*Scrisoarea IV*), as C.M. Popescu translates it (155-156):

“Where, here and there, amidst the dark, a gleam of milk-white
moonlight strays
From out a Carmen seculare as I did dream in former days...
But for this sad sigh and wailing, whistling, discordant sound,
Scattered cries and tangled noises in my weeping lyre are found.

What the outcome of existence? Where the message that I had?
All the lyre's chords are broken, and the minstrel man is mad.”

Within this context, the silence (of the harp) has become, semantically speaking, the expression of an absence. This time, silence means soundlessness, wordlessness. No plenitude or ecstasy, no tranquillity in the silence of a surrendered, doubtful Orpheus. On the contrary, when the poet is silent, the world gets more and more noisy. The *sourdine* of nature cannot be heard anymore. The disarmed poet cannot hear the silence beyond things, no reverie is possible. The contrast between noise and silence generates a crisis in the nature of poetic language and in the Orphic conscience. As Picard (141) asserts that: “the poetic word has a natural relation with the silence from which it comes and may produce a purely natural silence”, therefore it might be suppressed by the words, orphans of silence, which fill the air with noise because they do not rise from silence but from other noisy words and go back to noisy words (Picard, 168). The distance between people is filled with noise. The *hesychia* of the sight vanished. The verses from *I see the City – An Anthill* (tr. by Dan Solomon, 35) are very relevant through their auditory images, contrastive to the auditory imagery Eminescu got his lecturers used to:

“Excited people move on talking,
All in a hurry, never stopping.”
“The church bell ring”
“And chanting prayers bearded popes.”
“Tah-rah, boom, boom, behind the crowd
Arrive proud soldiers with steps loud” led by “a drum major tall”
“The city's clocks now strike the hour,
But no one listens to these clocks
The crowd is too large and it talks.”

No sound in the urban atmosphere the poet describes in such a modern poem. The ringing bells, the priest's chant, the menacing "tah-rah, boom, boom" and the people's chit-chat create noise, the rumour of the city that swallows the primordial silence. But Eminescu does not anticipate the modern poetry of the 20th Century only through this urban images that some of the poems deliver. Critics have also identified the modern struggle regarding the limits of the poetic language, the fear of nothingness, expressionist influences, the crisis and the estrangement of the poetic ego (*Melancholy*).

One of the critics that extensively analysed Eminescu's poetry from this perspective is Ioana Bot in her study *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu (Eminescu Explained to My Brother)*. The critic observes that Eminescu had always been interested in exploring the potentialities of the poetic language, more than the romantic poets used to. In fact, he was opened to linguistic experiments; these aspects are more evident in the posthumous poetry, in the laboratory, as it has been called. As Ioana Bot (45-46) explains, in the case of Eminescu's poems, the experiment of the poetic imagery is always accompanied by the experiment of the poetic language so that the latter seems more important than the first. The poetic imagery is built in such a way as to challenge the limits and the powers of the language hoping for a total experience that includes both action and speech, looking for the word that happens and institutes reality/ essence of the reality.

Similarly, in his book *Orfeu și tentația realului (Orpheus and the Temptation of the Real)*, Șt. Aug. Doinaș describes this crisis of the creation through commenting the Orphic myth. Doinaș's essay emphasizes new meaning in Eminescu's poetry where the Orphic hypostasis is almost always confronted with a crisis of creating. On its way out to recuperate Eurydice/ Poesis from the tenebrous Hades through his poetic chords, Orpheus endlessly struggles.

The poem *Povestea magului călător în stele (The Story of the Magus, the Stars Traveller* –my. tr.) contours the portrait of the Orpheus haunted by dreams and thoughts ("prigonit sta de visuri și de gânduri"), oscillating between dream and thought, without taking a decision („Ce vrea nici el nu știe, se chinuie în zadar"). He is a blind, revolted madman („Orb, nebun, ce blastămă firea" 152). This time, the poetic genius, in its blindness, is totally targeted towards the inner world i.e. the darkness where he invokes Eurydice/ Poesis. In fact, thorough the power of his music, Orpheus asks Eurydice to come out from his inner *Hades*. Similarly, the poet invokes Poesis through the poetic word, but the chords are silent, benumbed („strune amortite"):

“All the lyre's chords are broken, and the minstrel man is mad.”(*Satire IV*). Actually, the poet looks after the perfect verbal form. The word should not just denominate, but also make the reality it denominates, to recuperate the native force of Logos. Nevertheless, the lyre, the poetic language remains silent.

Șt. Aug. Doinaș studies the Orphic myth from the perspective of this crisis of language. When Orpheus lost Eurydice, he actually lost the concrete object of his passion, the reality he would fervently search afterwards. As long as he is aware of the effect his lyre has upon nature and reality itself, he is willing to try the impossible. After convincing the Gods, he descends *ad inferos* but he fails in respecting the sole condition imposed. So, he turns back to verify whether Eurydice follows him and his lyre, verifying whether the Real can be whipped out from the abstract darkness. This temptation of the real explains the crisis of poetic language and of the poetic truth. Looking back towards the real, towards Eurydice, expresses the tentative of the poetic language to verify itself in relation to the reality it denominates. Eurydice cannot come from Hades as a reality, but as a shadow because the poetic creation cannot be but a copy of the reality itself, as the poetic word cannot institute the real. As for modern poets, for Eminescu too, this expectation gave birth to numerous trials to test the limits of language:

“In short, it tries to transform the sign back into meaning: its ideal, ultimately, would be to reach not the meaning of words, but the meaning of things themselves. This is why it clouds the language, increases as much as it can the abstractness of the concept and the arbitrariness of the sign and stretches to the limit the link between signifier and signified. ” (Roland Barthes, 133-134)

Orpheus looks back to verify whether Eurydice (the meaning of words) who is following him, because of his song, is the same with the real Eurydice (the meaning of things themselves). Nevertheless, Orpheus will never be followed from Hades by more than Eurydice's shadow. *Sonnet IV* (tr. by C. M. Popescu, 54) reflects the poet's doubts regarding the potentialities of the poem:

“When even the inner voice of thought is still,
And does some sacred chant my soul endear,
’Tis then I call to thee; but will you hear?
Will from the floating mists your form distil?”

The stanza clearly reiterates the Orphic myth. The poetic ego invokes

the ineffable (mistress) to come from the mists, but only when the voice of thought is silent. As Ioana Bot (46-47) asserts, the poet intends to recover the visionary power through the imagination of the ego, but also the reclaim of the ontogenetic word. Not reason, not conceptualisation but the imaginative power of poetic language is being endlessly tested. One of these experiments, Ioana Bot referred to as a proof for Eminescu's modern interest for poetics, is *First Epistle* (tr. by Leon Levițchi 151):

When there was but utter absence of both life impulse and will
When unopen there was nothing, although everything was
hidden,
When, by His own self pervaded, resting lay the Allforbidden.
Was it an abyss? A chasm? Wat'ry plains without an end?"

"Of the unmade things the shadows had not yet begun to gleam
And, with its own self-contented, peace eternal reigned supreme.
Suddenly, a dot starts moving- the primeval, lonely Other...
It becomes the Father potent, of the void it makes the mother."

The above description of the cosmogony presents the silence from the beginning of the world, silence as "peace eternal reigned supreme" and makes use of a series of contradictions. The first stanza shows up as a linguistical experiment that tests the possibilities of the poetic language to express the inexpressible. In Ioana Bot's inspired words (232, my tr.): "Eminescu's poetics is built on the scaffold of a huge struggle with the language, hoping to destroy it, to reduce it to silence, to turn it inside out, against its logic of functioning." By doing this, Eminescu repeats the child's gesture of decomposing the toy in order to see how it works. It is an avant-garde gesture that anticipates our modern poets such as Tudor Arghezi or even Nichita Stănescu.

The second stanza focuses more on the fundamental relationship between silence and the word/ Logos. As long as the first stanza expresses the silence as "utter absence of both life impulse and will" (thus the poetic language is challenged to express such silence), the second stanza points out the silence as presence, "own self-contented, peace eternal reigned supreme" from which the poetic language inherits its sacral gifts. The word as concept, the active principle seems to englobe the *animus*, the masculine, "the Father potent", while silence as fecund silence seems to englobe the *anima*, the feminine, the mother.

The world began simultaneously with this cosmic union of the feminine principle and of the masculine principle. Similarly,

microcosmically, the poetic universe starts where the Word, as active principle, separates and distinguishes itself from silence, as static principle of fecundity. The Word activates the rich, latent silence. The Word is masculine, belongs to *animus*, to conceptualization and reason, while silence is feminine, it is *anima* expressed by the force of imagery. These two dimensions of the poetic universe (of Psyche, of human spirit) co-exist as if they would be into a two wheel gear. Due to this tension between them, a creative energy crosses all the poems. In Eminescu's poetry, this tensioned duality is of outmost fertility and it has been of outmost interest in numerous studies on the double or the narcissism.

In the light of this duality and the tensioning game (Word-Silence) we have depicted in Mihai Eminescu's poems, we may draw several conclusions.

Firstly, silence is presence and plenitude, repose within the feminine through the force of imagery. Frequently, imagery refers to beneficent presences such as nature or the feminine (in love). Imagery poetically restores the paradisiacal silence, but for a keen perception, the senses should be transfigured. This is how the mind (the generator of the concepts, of the word) recovers its *hesychia*. Here is one of the multiple cogs that go together in the poetic gear. Senses should be purified so that they could reach the silence from inside the imagery (the feminine) that is to be comprised into the poetic words. Sometimes, this silence is superabundant, the message is so dense that only sight may carry it, not words, not mind, not reason. This happens always in the contemplation of the feminine, the Beauty embodied by the angelic mistress or *Poesis* herself. Another point of tension is revealed here.

Secondly, silence installs itself as a crisis of the poetic language, as absence – a negative category. In other words, the poet cannot create because between him and primordial silence appears a sort of Orphic doubt regarding his own capacity of comprising the essential silence in the poetic Word. This doubt tensions once more the gear and produces the linguistic experiments meant to explore the possibilities of language to enhance the Silence. How could the poet capture the ineffable, the Silence itself? His wish is to grasp the real Eurydice beyond the force of imagery. His hubris is to see his poetic word being incarnated, the reality itself, not its representation. However, as silence is endlessly evading, the poet is continually trying. These poet's numerous attempts are just as many approaches of *Poesis*.

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