

# The Translation of Silence: The Interdisciplinary Nature of *A Book of Silence* and its Implications for Translation



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## Introduction

When taking for the first time *The Book of Silence*, by Sara Maitland, after looking at the sober cover, and reading the first sentence, the feeling is that it is a novel: “It is early morning. It is a morning of extraordinary radiance...” (Maitland, *A Book of Silence* 1). This first impression is further reinforced by the several initial references, namely to: “small birds (...) chirping occasionally”; by the “pair of crows [that] flapped past making their raucous cough noises”; and by the overall mental picture glimpsed after the description of “the seashore”, which seems to transport the reader into a wonderful world, full of beauty and tranquillity.

The following lines in the book (*A Book of Silence* 1) still preserve that picture with some magnificence, especially when the author minutely describes: “the two-carriage Glasgow to Stranraer train”; or the local Neil, who would “rumble past on his quad bike after seeing to his sheep on the hill above the house”. It is almost a painting, with some moving characters and rather few slightly distracting noises, which do not disturb the author / narrator view, who simply says she wants to reach what Virginia Woolf taught her: “every woman writer needs a room of her own. She didn’t know the half of it, in my opinion. I need a moor of my own”. And this wishful sentence is especially reflected on the second and more commercial cover used for this same book, which had a very sober first cover.

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This feeling is, however, suddenly replaced by a wave of facts reported by the author and connected to the surrounding everyday reality, when she starts referring to the “completion certificate” and to the “building regulations and standards” (*A Book of Silence* 2) she had to obtain to make the changes and improvements she needed in her new house. This “reality check”, with such an earthly, factual and colloquial perspective, is, in fact, a clear symptom of what the reader will have to face for the rest of the book.

Nevertheless, the next few lines show Maitland’s reason for the writing of this book, when, according once again to the author’s words, she writes, “I have lived a very noisy life” (*A Book of Silence* 3), and further states she needed to seek silence, and to escape from crowds and noisy places and situations. Still, at the same time and somehow paradoxically, she refers to the fear and danger caused by silence in her own, or anyone else’s, mental health or social life. Thus, she contrasts the romanticism associated to silence to the more factual threat it normally raises, and which, in fact, most people are so keen to avoid. That is, silence actually looks like a threat that normally reminds us of isolation and loneliness, of moments when we have to confront our inner fears and ensure they are kept inside, very quiet and secure.

### **Technical, scientific, literary and other crossroads**

But firstly, let’s go a little back and start with a few words about the writer, so as to explain her background and probably some of the reasons why she specifically wrote this book in 2008.

Sara Maitland is the author of numerous works of fiction, including the Somerset Maugham Award-winning *Daughter of Jerusalem*, and several other non-fiction books, mainly about religion. Born in 1950, Maitland studied at Oxford University and presently lives in Galloway, and is a tutor on the Distance Learning MA in Creative Writing for Lancaster University.

The work referred to in the above comments is *A Book of Silence*, which was shortlisted for the Bristol Festival of Ideas Book Prize and the Orwell Prize, and long-listed for the Samuel Johnson Prize and the Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust Book Award for Scottish non-fiction book of the year. In this book, Sara Maitland cleverly tries to weave her personal experiences with many literary texts of all sorts and also with carefully chosen historical episodes, highlighting the fascination she nurtures for silence as a theme and a special motto in her life.

In this ride through poetic, literary and scientific paths, she argues for the importance of silence in a world increasingly taken up by noise, showing her deep knowledge of this subject to readers, by providing them either with complex explanations, in very simple words, or with some easy notions, but using an intricate wording. And it is this special intertwining that certainly made it more difficult to translate and convey both the content and the many special literary forms used by the author.

The truth is that, in some of the more real and factual passages in the book, Sara Maitland provides information in such a specialized or minute detail that readers have to pay close attention to what is being presented, as can be seen for instance in the sentence, “the most exquisite New England four-poster bed made of bird’s eye maple with golden candy-twist posts” (*A Book of Silence* 11). Such a description shows a notorious and frequent tendency to present facts and real things in Maitland’s peculiar and very detailed way.

In some other sentences, she inserts her own, more personal, feelings and ideas, which seem to be part of a strategy that aims at granting her, among readers, a special status of being able to establish a factual connection to reality, because she tries to speak of things they must recognize in their own everyday lives.

Another example of this common connection to reality and to factual truth in the book is Maitland's use of scientific information, while sometimes concerning her own and very personal subjects, such as in the case of the following sentence: "I had always enjoyed a textbook twenty-eight-day menstrual cycle" (*A Book of Silence* 18). After this information, she reflects for some pages on the almost complete absence of references to the theme of menopause in literature in general. This literary silence about the theme is, for Maitland, an unanswered question and an area she extensively tried to explore in her own literary career, trying to deepen some thoughts and ideas upon this somehow unexplored and unknown topic in previous books. Still, the main purpose of such scientific references seems to be a permanent link to sustainable and verifiable facts, preferably those supported by scientific research.

Within this same theme, and somewhere in the middle of similar insights, Maitland presents other scientific references to "birds' bones" and refers the correlation and similitude of such bones with "mammals' bones" (*A Book of Silence* 19-20), namely to "menopause women's bones" (20). After this, Maitland goes on describing several instances of physical forces which are *silent*, surround us every day and on which we depend, namely "gravity, electricity, light, tides, the unseen and unheard spinning of the whole cosmos" (20). She even complements this information with the silent Earth's spinning speed, the silent organic growth rhythm and so many other cases of nature's endeavours to which humans are normally unaware. Once again, this discourse serves practical purposes, of course, but is more or less related to a pattern of thought based on Maitland's world view and philosophical stance, which mingles scientific concepts with some lay knowledge to captivate readers and keep their attention.

The next example may be even more enlightening concerning this type of behaviour... Maitland departs on a large tour, once again to one of her own personal experiences – "gardening" – which in the past served to connect her to

nature's silent growth, and, once more, to her need to work in silence. The techniques she explored, the several different types of gardens she saw and made her wonder, the book she co-authored about this subject and, finally, the landscapes she discovered have made her actually change her life, in more than one way. In fact, all of this meant that the author eventually discovered a vast array of pleasures and benefits in prayer, contemplation and living her inner silence. The mixture of complex notions and simple language plays in this case a decisive role in every reader's mind, attracting people to the indispensable changes one must make in one's life so as to achieve higher purposes.

Nevertheless, after having reached this stage, Maitland still finds it difficult to define the word "silence" and uses the resources of the Oxford English Dictionary to try to figure out a more real meaning for that word/concept: "According to the OED, 'silence' means *both* an absence of all noises *and* an absence of speech" (*A Book of Silence* 25). But this account is not yet complete without a further research on some of her personal uses of that word and the interference of natural phenomena into the qualities of peace and silence.

Additionally – and profusely in all the book – Maitland quotes several authors, from many varied areas, both scientific and non-scientific. From John Cage, "the radical composer", she uses the following lines to assert that "there is no such thing as really physical silence":

There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot... Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music. (*A Book of Silence* 26)

From Henry Thoreau, “the Transcendentalist radical philosopher” (30), Maitland uses an excerpt to explain his motivation to live alone by the Walden Pond, thus also trying to justify her own decision to move to an isolated place:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what I had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (*A Book of Silence* 30)

And Maitland even says she is with Angela Carter, the English novelist and journalist, known for her feminist, magical realism, and picaresque works, when she describes her youth and student time:

There is a tendency to underplay, even to devalue completely, the experience of the 1960s, especially for women, but towards the end of that decade there was a brief period of public philosophical awareness that occurs only very occasionally in human history; when, truly, it felt like Year One, when all that was holy was in the process of being profaned, and we were attempting to grapple with the real relations between human beings... At a very unpretentious level, we were truly asking ourselves questions about the nature of reality. Most of us may not have come up with very startling answers and some of us scared ourselves good and proper and retreated into cul-de-sacs of infantile mysticism... but even so I can date to that time and to that sense of heightened awareness of the society around me in the summer of 1968 my own questioning of the nature of my reality as a woman. (*A Book of Silence* 8)

Simultaneously, Maitland resorts very often to passages of stories related to real experiences, like the following from Richard Byrd, a US admiral and polar explorer, who decided to spend a winter alone in the Antarctic:

I wanted to go for experience sake: one man's desire to know that kind of experience to the full, to be by himself for a while and to taste the peace and quiet and solitude long enough to find out how good they really are... (*A Book of Silence* 31)

This use by Sara Maitland of different authors and books intends to cover a very wide range of styles, registers and resources. In all instances, the purpose in using such quotes seems to be the corroboration or justification of Maitland's ideas by people who have lived in some way situations where silence was prominent, or who wanted to share their ideas on this subject, shedding some light on the way silence really affected them or modified their lives.

Still, some of the quotes also serve to show support for Maitland's quest and a genuine wish to be helpful to the author, such as in the case of Janet Batsleer, a friend of Sara Maitland, who, in a "provocative letter", says: "Silence is the place of death, of nothingness" (*A Book of Silence* 28). After being teased by this friend, Sara Maitland feels an even greater need to follow her pursuit and to make a serious effort attempting to reach a sense of discovery and achievement to prove that Janet was wrong when she said: "All silence is waiting to be broken" (28).

All these examples and situations only serve to show how diverse and interdisciplinary is Maitland's style in *A Book of Silence*, since the previous examples, situations or quotes are taken only from the first chapter of her book! The almost four hundred pages in the book replicate this strategy that combines personal opinions, scientific insights, quotations of all sorts, and various other devices and strategies making it a varied and multifaceted work, and

undoubtedly an excellent source of inspiration concerning the theme of silence for any reader, channelling so many different voices and figurative sounds on this subject that one may even wonder how really silent the book is!

### **Translation as a channel for many voices**

For translation, as the long list with such a wealth of resources has already shown, the whole project became a highly complex task, since it meant untangling and deciphering this very complex mixture of scientific concepts, research data, quotes from very different books, personal opinions, cross-references, literary pieces, and so on...

While in most cases Sara Maitland tried to convey the more difficult notions with a simple and common language, basically aiming at the explanation of ideas both to educated and non-educated readers – who otherwise might not understand them – in other cases she used the most exquisite vocabulary, probably to be more accurate and not to miss her main points or ideas, or even to provide a better channel for the readers' attention to her aims. The difficulty for translation is then to assess her intentions, and try as much as possible to replicate the author's stance, adopting the attitude of a chameleon in each case and situation, very much like the picture depicting every translators' work on the cover of *Translation and Translating: Theory and Practice* (1991), by Roger T. Bell.

The first priority in the translation's checklist of "Things to do" became then almost an obligation to keep the original structures of complex and/or simple vocabulary, that described complex and/or simple events and episodes, and the development of a common strategy that would enable the most straightforward transposition of such structures into Portuguese, trying to follow exactly the same patterns. Although this may seem quite easy, some quite simple

truths need to be remembered, and the example is simply shown in the “bitter little limerick”, in page 5 of the original book:

There was a young girl called Christine  
Who shattered the Party machine.  
It isn't too rude  
To lie in the nude  
But to lie in the House is obscene. (*A Book of Silence* 5)

Which became, in the published Portuguese translation:

Havia uma jovem chamada Christine  
Que destruiu a máquina do Partido.  
Não é demasiado rude  
Mentir quando nu  
Mas mentir na Câmara é obsceno. (*O Livro do Silêncio* 387)

The simple and basic truths concerning the problems the translation of this limerick into Portuguese had to face, and that probably needed to be addressed, are:

- The syntactic structures of both languages – English and Portuguese – are somewhat different, which makes it impossible to keep the same sequence of words, e.g. “the Party machine” / “a máquina do Partido”;
- The rhythm and rhyme of the above limerick is also obviously impossible to keep, especially if one wants to keep the same semantics, which resulted in e.g. “It isn't too rude / To lie in the nude” / “Não é demasiado rude / Mentir quando nu”;
- The semantics of some words would need a much more complex explanation, which is not always possible in a published translation, where footnotes were not welcome (as usual, according to any

publisher's point of view) and bearing in mind that the editor converted those to final notes, as it happened with e.g. "To lie in the nude / Mentir quando nu".

- And finally, not all specific vocabulary has simpler or equal versions in Portuguese, which disrupts the pattern used by the author in the original text, as can be seen in another case, e.g. "A simple sprout of couch grass" (*A Book of Silence* 21) / "Um simples rebento de relva" (*O Livro do Silêncio* 37).

Next, as it was already mentioned, it also became important to keep a very close attention to literary and religious pieces profusely used and quoted by the author, especially those where poetic discourse was present and played a prevailing and prominent role, creating an especially engaging and healing sensation – according to Maitland's own words. But this was not always possible, namely when tradition (and some already established/canonical translated text) has already engendered a new form of expression. This is particularly the case of Bible passages, like the following:

I have set my soul in silence and in peace,  
As the weaned child on his mother's breast  
so even is my soul. (*A Book of Silence* 11)

Which is, in the published version of this passage in the recognized Portuguese Bible, by the *Capuchinhos* (and which has also been used in the translation):

Aquieto e sossego a minha alma,  
Como uma criança saciada no colo de sua mãe;  
Como uma criança saciada,  
Assim está a minha alma dentro de mim. (*O Livro do Silêncio* 24)

In general terms, the main objective for the translation was to scrupulously follow Maitland's style and intentions, while it had to be taken into consideration that such a concept – “alleged intentions” – might be highly questionable. After all, is it possible to assess the intentions of any author, let alone to really know them? When the author was not consulted to offer her own interpretation and demonstrate her peculiar focus (as it happened in this case), it is only natural that one wonders whether the author's intention could be assumed.

Nevertheless, in most translations the original text has to be considered according to its own merits (that is, without any practical help from the author), and the translator has to work from his/her own interpretation of the author's intentions. And the actual truth is that any translation needs to reconstruct the author, and his/her ideas mostly from the evidence shown in the text, and then try to differentiate between textual implication (the logical things implied by a text) and textual implicature (the aspects that are taken to be intentionally implied by the author).

The idea was, after all, to follow Douglas Robinson's words:

The author as sovereign subject intends the original text, and leaves that intention lying immanent in the text; the translator occupies that intention and “writes” the target text – and is a “writer” only in this sense. (*Who Translates?* 4)

Therefore, putting aside the issue of the so-called “alleged intentions”, and acting on his attributed role, the translator worked on the huge amount of available material – words/lexical items – relying mostly on the interpretations he made of the original text and on the repeated statements by the author showing her willingness to “live” in silence, and “flourish in this new atmosphere” (*A Book of Silence* 283) to convey this voice from within.

But the value attributed to Maitland's discursive forms had to vary according to one fundamental factor unforeseen by translation at the beginning of the whole project. And that was the target readership, which naturally (at least considering the publisher's opinion...) imposed some major functional restrictions, and that were clearly stated by the editor in charge after the first consultations. Thus, the main consideration concerning this subject was that this book would be mostly read by people following New Age trends and self-help books!

According to such specificity in the order, this type of readership, unlike scientists or highly educated readers, for whom enlightened or techno-scientific codes originating from the dominant English language/cultures would be paramount, meant that translation needed to adopt a "lighter" translation strategy, essentially dominated by a clearer syntax and not so specific terminology, especially in cases where such solutions might hinder immediate comprehension.

Therefore, any advantages linked to mastering scientific terminology and lexicons needed sometimes to be left aside, in favour of the unavoidable stances of more fluency and better readability, which were once again adopted, as it happens in so many books and translation works, and as already has been publicly stated by Lawrence Venuti (153-4) and Jorge Pinho (282).

In this very specific case, the factor controlling translation and rewriting work was a professional inside the literary system: the editor. And it is a well-known fact that both these basic processes of rewriting – editing and translating, as identified by André Lefevere (9) – are very influential and can manipulate ideas and cultures, because they project the image of authors or of their books into other cultures, making them overcome the traditional barriers of the source cultures. Furthermore, the motivation that lay behind this "translation order" came from the editor's particular choice of the book – because of her very own

emotional and private reasons – and its fulfilment in terms of the translation strategy that was followed was once again mainly dictated by her peculiar rules.

### **Short conclusions**

Maitland's academic investigation is filled with many personal accounts, including her own, and it is so rich because of the sound of so many different voices. Although linguistic unification has taken place in the last fifty years in most branches of science, Maitland tried to diversify her discourse as much as possible, especially in those cases that were so peculiar to her own special likings and endeavours.

It is a fact that English is nowadays the language of science worldwide, and that academic advancement is everywhere dependent on publication in English. In fact, the widespread idea stated by David Bellos in his book *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, that "English is simpler than other languages" (17), is probably wrong, but has made its way into today's societies, which promote a kind of language unification based on the use of English. Besides the advances made by Linnaeus in the description and classification of botanical species, as well as Berzelius' research in chemistry, with the addition of some more common names and explanations, the fact is that English made it easier for most readers to understand and follow some more complex ideas, through its alleged simplicity.

Despite all this, the voice of translation from English into any other language still tries to provide books with a new language in which to dwell, and still tries to provide the same feelings of comfort, disquiet, and so on, created by any English author's explorations. "The Invisible Hand" of any sensible translator, recognized as such by Douglas Robinson in his much undervalued book *Who Translates?* (180-6), actually tries to "spirit-channel" (180) authors' visions and to allow readers to establish some kind of contact with worlds created elsewhere, realities otherwise unseen, unheard, unknown.

Still, the widespread notion that translation is a mere mechanical channel that serves to transmit knowledge actually reduces translation work to a highly undervalued cliché that prevents us from understanding its various dimensions and critically analysing its concrete practice. Bearing in mind that it mediates between languages and cultures, translation depends critically on human intervention and on socio-historical circumstances, especially linked to the actual conditions under which it is practiced (Lefevere 1-16).

Therefore, translation may be profoundly intertwined with the history of science and ideas, and may inescapably contribute to the scientific establishment and to scientific knowledge among peoples. But in a particularly notorious case, like this one, even a book that endeavours to adopt in its original version an educated, referential and scientific view is subject to the need to popularise complicated ideas and to facilitate the understanding of ideas and/or words by less-educated readers in another language.

Under the rules of the manipulative hands of translating and editing, *A Book of Silence*, by Sara Maitland, has thus become, in the Portuguese translation, the voice of a spirit who lived so many wonderful experiences and has the ability to tell those in a powerful and marvellous way to her readers. But it is also a voice that was changed by translation, or rather that was subject to some adaptations to suit the anticipated expectations of some, very specific, Portuguese readers.

To quote the author, and to provide a conclusion to her quest, it should perhaps be stated: “And the rest, I hope, is silence” (*A Book of Silence* 287).

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#### **Internet**

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