

THE SOMATIC CODE AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR VERBAL DISCOURSE IN STEFAN ZWEIG'S NOVELLAS (*FEAR AND LEPORELLA*)

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Abstract

This article explores the poetics of silence in the short prose of the Austrian modernist writer Stefan Zweig, focusing on his novellas *Fear* (*Angst*, 1920) and *Leporella* (1929). Drawing on current methodologies in narratology, semiotics, and psychoanalysis, the study investigates how characters navigate the systemic blockage of verbal communication channels. The author demonstrates that unexpressed affect undergoes aesthetic substitution and sublimation, shifting onto the level of the somatic (bodily) code. Gestures, facial expressions, vegetative reactions, and gaze trajectories are analyzed not as mere decorative or illustrative components, but as an alternative, highly semiotized language of the unconscious that operates within the writer's artistic system when spoken language fails.

Keywords: Stefan Zweig, Austrian Modernism, Poetics of Silence, Somatic Code, Repression, Aposiopesis, Psychological Depth, Narrative Lacunae.

1. Introduction: The Crisis of Language and the Poetics of the Unsayable

The turn of the twentieth century in European cultural history was marked by a profound epistemological skepticism regarding the communicative and representative capacities of human speech. The Austro-German intellectual milieu of this period (*Wien um 1900*) was famously centered around the systemic **crisis of language** (**Sprachkrise**), masterfully captured in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's seminal *The Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902) and later conceptualized by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which strictly demarcated the boundaries of the sayable [Wittgenstein, 2017]. In this climate of linguistic devaluation, modernist literature underwent a radical shift away from the totalizing verbalization characteristic of nineteenth-century realism toward the orchestration of implicit structures, narrative lacunae, ellipses, pauses, and absolute silence.

In domestic and international literary scholarship, the prose of Stefan Zweig (1881–1942) has traditionally been associated with high emotional expressiveness, narrative dynamism, and dense psychological monologues. The historical canon of Zweig studies—exemplified by the seminal works of Donald Daviau [Daviau, 1987] and Boris Suchkov [Suchkov, 1980]—focused predominantly on the author's humanist pathos, biographical method, and the overt depiction of destructive human passions.

However, underneath the external avalanche of words in Zweig's texts, there always lies a zone of absolute muteness. In Zweig's artistic universe, existential shock, shameful secrets, social guilt, or criminal affects are fundamentally unverbalizable.

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned to the unsaid layers of Zweig's prose. Scholars like Ingo Lafleur have highlighted the profound connection between Viennese modernism and the "poetics of silence" [Lafleur, 2014], though such approaches often remain strictly cultural or thematic. The strictly narratological aspect of textual lacunae—the concepts of narrative ellipsis and **paralipsis** formulated by Gérard Genette [Genette, 1998], alongside Wolfgang Iser's theory of **indeterminacy and blanks (Leustellen)** [Iser, 1997]—has not yet been systematically integrated with the bodily syntax of Zweig's characters.

The relevance and novelty of this study lie in addressing this critical scholarly gap. When a Zweig protagonist undergoes a psychological trauma or confronts social taboos, the verbal communication channel is blocked, yet the narrative momentum does not freeze. In accordance with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic law regarding the dynamics of **repression (Verdrängung)** [Freud, 2021], the unexpressed discourse undergoes semiotic substitution. This article argues that in Stefan Zweig's novellas, specifically *Fear* and *Leporella*, the resulting textual silence is compensated for by an intense, highly semiotized bodily syntax—the **somatic code**.

Gestures, micro-movements, vegetative reactions, and gaze trajectories are transformed into an alternative, suggestive language that evades conscious censorship and manifests the truth of the unconscious despite the characters' mute lips.

2. Theoretical Framework: Semiotization of the Mute Body

To construct a rigorous methodology for decoding textual silence, one must

synthesize psychoanalytic symptomology with structural semiotics. In Freud's paradigm, the retention of speech is never a passive vacuum; it is a symptomatic manifestation of a dynamic conflict between the Ego, the Superego, and the Id. Freud famously postulated that "he that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore" [Freud, 2021]. Thus, a pause in a dialogue becomes a topographical space where a repressed affect breaches conscious defenses, utilizing the physical body as its canvas.

In the realm of structural semiotics, this phenomenon aligns with Yuri Lotman's concept of code-switching within a text. When the primary language system (verbal speech) becomes incapacitated due to external taboos or internal trauma, the text automatically activates a secondary modeling system [Lotman, 1998]. In Zweig's novellas, this secondary system is the somatic code, which operates on its own structured grammar. This grammar includes:

Vegetative signifiers: Involuntary physiological shifts (paleness, blushing, sweating, tremor).

Kinesic signifiers: Conscious or unconscious bodily movements (convulsive hand gestures, abrupt posture changes).

Proxemic signifiers: Spatial relationships between characters (distancing, avoidance, physical confinement).

Ocular signifiers: The direction, intensity, and duration of the gaze.

By replacing abstract psychological descriptions with these concrete somatic markers, Zweig allows the reader to perceive the intensity of an affect directly, transforming the act of reading into an empathetic, highly visual reconstruction of the character's internal crisis.

3. Neurotic Somatization and Judicial Silence in *Fear* (Angst)

In the novella *Fear* (1920), the somatic code is deployed to portray the psychological disintegration of Irene, a bourgeois woman trapped in a cycle of blackmail after an extramarital affair. Here, silence is dualistic: it is used protectively by Irene to hide her guilt, and repressively by her husband Fritz, a prominent attorney, who uses silence as an instrument of psychological sadism.

On the micro-stylistic level, Irene's speech is systematically deformed by **aposiopesis**—the abrupt breaking off of a sentence. Zweig writes:

"I was... I had to go to..." Irene faltered, feeling the words turn to stone on her lips. Her husband did not interrupt her; his gaze lingered on her face, prolonging this suffocating, gray silence... [Zweig, 1996, vol. 2, p. 45].

Graphically marked by ellipses, these syntactical fractures represent the precise moments where the Superego blocks verbalization to prevent exposure. However, the repressed guilt instantly breaches Irene's defenses via vegetative and kinesic pathways. Her body begins to lie pathologically: her hands shake uncontrollably while holding household objects, sudden cold sweats break out across her forehead, and her voice loses its natural timbre.

Fritz, functioning as a representative of the Law, reads these somatic signs as physical evidence (*corpora delicti*). Instead of interrogating her directly, he deliberately utilizes long, calculated pauses during their domestic conversations. Fritz's silence is not a communicative vacuum; it is a highly structured judicial narrative. By withholding verbal accusations, he transforms the silence of the domestic space into a psychological mirror that reflects and magnifies Irene's internal guilt.

Zweig demonstrates that within this bourgeois environment, verbal language has become thoroughly corrupted by social convention and deceit. Spoken words are used to maintain a facade of respectability, whereas the somatic code remains untamed and completely submissive to the truth of the emotional affect. Irene's ultimate somatic collapse—her muteness followed by a hysterical flight to the brink of suicide—is the direct result of this prolonged, unendurable tension between a lying mouth and a truth-telling body.

4. Pathological Pre-Verbal Silence and Criminal Kinesics in *Leporella*

While *Fear* examines somatization as a neurotic defense mechanism in an educated, upper-class protagonist, the novella *Leporella* (1929) explores a radically different modality of the unsaid: a **pathological, pre-verbal silence** rooted in cognitive and social deprivation. The protagonist, a coarse mountain peasant woman named Crescens, is characterized by an initial muteness that signifies not repressed

emotions, but a total absence of self-reflection and linguistic capabilities.

Zweig introduces Crescens as a "human beast of burden" or an "automaton," whose vocabulary is limited to monosyllabic, guttural responses. Her initial silence represents a profound alienation from the domain of the *Logos*. However, when she is employed by a capricious, aristocratic Baron, a fierce, canine-like devotion is awakened within her. Because Crescens lacks the conceptual and linguistic apparatus required to articulate complex emotional states like loyalty or love, this internal affect instantly undergoes total somatization, mutating into an absolute, ominous obedience.

The structural core of the novella hinges on a telepathic, purely non-verbal communication loop between the Baron and Crescens. Zweig masterfully demonstrates how a criminal plot can be formulated, negotiated, and executed entirely within a verbal void:

He did not speak to her, he never looked at her directly, yet she knew. She read the heavy sigh that escaped his chest when the Baroness entered the room; she measured the sharp twitch of his mouth... In that absolute stillness, an unspoken pact was sealed between the master and the beast [Zweig, 1996, vol. 5, p. 112].

Crescens bypasses spoken language entirely, reading the Baron's subtle kinesic and ocular codes. His sighs of frustration regarding his hysterical wife are interpreted by the servant as a direct command to act.

The ensuing crime—driving the Baroness to suicide—is executed in absolute, clinical silence. There are no verbal arguments or open confrontations; there is only a methodical, quiet psychological suffocation of the victim. Crescens becomes the living monument to this shared criminal secret.

The tragic resolution of the novella illustrates the psychoanalytic inevitability of a somatic collapse when an intolerable affect is denied any form of conscious exit.

When the Baron, horrified by the realization of what she has done, rejects her with disgust and orders her to leave, Crescens' world instantly collapses. Lacking the linguistic tools to confess, defend herself, or vocalize her despair, her Ego is left entirely defenseless. Her unexpressed rage and grief collapse inward, manifesting as a sudden physical and mental paralysis. By throwing herself into a river, Crescens literally drowns her secret. This final act of self-destruction directly mirrors the

climax of *Amok* (1922): in both texts, Zweig demonstrates that an unendurable, criminal, or deeply shameful discourse finds its ultimate, irreversible asylum within the mute depths of a water environment.

5. Conclusion: The Epistemological Paradox of Zweig's Modernism

The comparative analysis of *Fear* and *Leporella* underscores the systemic coherence of the somatic code within Stefan Zweig's short fiction. Whether analyzing the sophisticated, neurotic suppression of a bourgeois woman or the raw, pre-verbal pathology of an uneducated peasant, Zweig consistently positions the human body as the ultimate locus of psychological truth.

When existential trauma, social guilt, or criminal obsessions compromise the primary verbal channel, the somatic code systematically assumes the burden of representation. Through an anatomical tracking of physical symptoms—ranging from vegetative tremors and ocular duels to spatial avoidance—Zweig constructs a highly distinctive variant of modernist psychological prose.

Ultimately, this structural mechanism reveals the central epistemological paradox of Stefan Zweig's modernism: the author deploys a maximum of verbal expression, stylistic dynamism, and narrative energy precisely to illustrate the absolute, tragic inability of human speech to ever fully articulate the depths of the human soul.

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