“My penchant for silence”: Mark Twain’s Rhetorical Art of the Unspoken

Twain writing in the study, 1874

Huck thinking on the raft.

Edward Windsor Kemble, 1874

Elisha Van Aken, 1874
“The boy . . . did not enjoy the prayer, he only endured it—if he even did that much.”
Twain and Talk

“It is my custom to keep talking until I get the audience cowed.”

Mark Twain, A Biography

“. . . and I began to talk.”

Roughing It

“When he gave even the simplest order, he discharged it like a blast of lightning, and sent a long, reverberating peal of profanity thundering after it. . . . I wished I could talk like that.”

Life on the Mississippi
Quarry Farm Porch View

“I am going to shut myself up in a farm-house alone, on top an Elmira hill, & write—on my book.”

To Elisha Bliss, March 17, 1871
Twain and Silence

“One cannot see too many summer sunrises on the Mississippi. . . . First, there is the eloquence of silence; for a deep hush broods everywhere. . . . next, there is the haunting sense of loneliness, isolation, remoteness from the worry and bustle of the world.”

Life on the Mississippi
A view from the porch

“the quietest of all places.”
Rhetorical Relationship between Silence and Talk

• Generally, most language users agree that language is all; silence is nothing. That talk has supremacy over silence.

• Silence is often viewed as simple passivity, but it can be strategic, empowering, and engaging—thus, rhetorical.

• The four rhetorical arts initially were reading, writing, speaking, and listening (this requires silence).

• Speech comes out of silence which permeates our every moment and is perforated by sound; thus, silence remains on form of speech.

• Speech and silence maintain a reciprocal relationship not an oppositional one, often delivering complementary rhetorical significance.
Three Features of Pre-Huck Writings

1. Valuing Auralcentrism as much or more than Ocularcentrism.

2. Juxtaposing moments of silence and talk to create incongruity usually for comic and sometime satiric purposes. (There's always a talker whose verbalized language works as the comic and dialectical counterpart to silence.)

3. Employing the trope of silence for its contemplative or meditative power—revealing the sublime.
Valuing Auralcentrism over Ocularcentrism

(Manner over Matter—i.e., what is seen)

“Jim Blaine’s Grandfather’s Ram” from *Roughing It*  

“Jim Baker’s Blue Jay Yarn” from *Tramp Abroad*
“How can they see what is not visible?”

“. . . we cannot see these things when they are not there.”

(Innocents Abroad)

(True Williams, 1869)
Occularcentrism juxtaposed with Auralcentrism

“It was MEMORY—RETROSPECTION—wrought into visible, tangible form”
“While we stood looking, a wart, or an excrescence of some kind appeared on the jaw of the Sphinx. We heard the familiar clink of a hammer . . . our well-meaning reptiles—I mean relic hunters—crawled up there and was trying to break a specimen from the face of the most majestic creation man has wrought”
“TALKERS” for Comic/Satiric Purposes

“How we suffered, suffered, suffered. She went on, hour after hour, till I was sorry I ever opened the mosquito question and gave her a start.”

(Roughing It)

“Slang was the language of Nevada.”

(Roughing It)
Revealing the Sublime:  
The Contemplative Power of the Trope of Silence

Only in contemplation can he hear the “words which were spoken in this little acre of rocks and sand eighteen centuries gone” (Innocents Abroad).
Images of sublimity from *Roughing It*
“There was little conversation, for the impressive scene overawed speech . . . It was the sublimest spectacle I ever witnessed.”

(Roughing It)
Sublimity destroyed by sound in *Life on the Mississippi*

“the unholy train . . . tearing along, ripping the sacred solitude to rags and tatters with its devil's warwhoop and the roar and thunder of its rushing wheels—and straightaway you are back in this world.”
Key Terms for Twain’s Rhetorical Power Silence and Talk

1. **Eavesdropping**: a rhetorical tactic of purposely positioning oneself on the edge of one’s own knowing so as to overhear and learn from others, and from oneself.

2. **Rhetorical Listening**: a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code for cross-cultural conduct.

3. **Identification/disidentification**: places wherein people may access agency to listen rhetorically not just for commonalities but also for differences.
Eavesdropping

Witnessing Murder

Hiding Money

“His heart was full of pity for her.”

Learning to be a prince

(True Williams, 1876)

(Edward Windsor Kemble, 1884)

(Frank Merrill, 1882)

(True Williams, 1876)
Eavesdropping, Rhetorical Listening, and Identifying

“We talked it over, and by and by Jim said it was such a black night, now, that it wouldn’t be no resdk to swim down to That big raft and crawl aboard and listen --they would talk about Cairo.”

(Adventures of Huckleberry Finn)

“What’s your name? . . . Charles William Albright, sir.”

“. . . if we let you off this time, will you keep out of these kinds of scrapes hereafter? . . . ‘Deed I will, boss. You try me.”

(Adventures of Huckleberry Finn)
Silence, Reflection, and Listening to Other Voices

to Tom Sawyer

to Pap

to community

To Tom, Miss Watson, and finally Jim

to Mary Jane
“I wish it would not talk; it is always talking. . . . and any new and strange sound intruding itself here upon the solemn hush of the these dreaming solitudes offends my ear. . . .”

“Wheresoever she was, there was Eden.”
Ultimate Union of Silence and Sound

(Edward Windsor Kemble, 1886)
Edward Windsor Kemble, 1886)