Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov • Vol. 2 (51) - 2009
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies

SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE – MANIFESTATIONS OF SILENCE IN GAIL JONES' *SORRY*

Catherine SCHWERIN[1]

Abstract: *This article examines Gail Jones' novel* ***Sorry****, mainly in terms of the symbolic relevance of its depiction of speech juxtaposed with the inability to articulate. The title relates the theme to a decade of national debate on the issue of saying "sorry" sparked off in Australian society in 1997 with the publication of the* ***Bringing Them Home Report****, documenting decades of removal of Aboriginal children from their families.* ***Sorry****, set in the 1930s and 40s, symbolically explores the relevance of articulating apology within the loose framework of this issue, but with its broader relevance to other collective traumas in mind. This highly lyrical novel takes the mysterious events leading to, surrounding and subsequent to the murder of anthropologist Nicholas Keene to explore how the failure to articulate frustration, blame, shame, and regret can lead to acts of violence, injustice and crippled lives. It also examines the communication spaces that evolve in the absence of speech or the ability to articulate. The message emerges that ultimately silence cannot indefinitely conceal the unspeakable, but uttering the word "sorry" in time permits healing, even if it cannot restore justice.*

Key words: *Australia, Aboriginal, trauma, communication, apology*.

The title of Gail Jones' novel *Sorry* (2007) is an allusion to a national and personal tragedy that was a source of fiery debate in Australia until recently. It refers to the issue of the "Stolen Children", Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families (approx. 1869 – 1969) in compliance with government policy under a series of so-called Aboriginal Protection Acts. In the context of this debate the title bears a political weight, since until the time of the novel's publication, the Government of Australia had denied the necessity for apology. Thus the title signals its defiance of this attitude. But there is more to the word "sorry" than meets the eye, just is more as there to complexities of the issues explored in this novel than the title alone might imply.

"Sorry" itself is an overused word in mainstream Australian, just as in other forms of standard English. It is an ostensibly polite, empty phrase tossed in quickly to appease, to avoid confrontation. At the same time it can be a difficult word to utter when one refuses to acknowledge or represses one's own blame or when the sense of shame is deep. Yet there is also an aspect of this word that is specific to Aboriginal usage and which inevitably made it the catchword of the whole issue of guilt and shame and reconciliation. In Aboriginal usage, "sorry" refers to more than just an apology. It is more closely

[1] University of Hamburg, Department of English and American Studies.

BDD-A20244 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:25 UTC)

related to the word "sorrow", also being used in the phrase "sorry business", which relates to death, grief and mourning and their associated rituals. As such it is a much more emotional word than in general usage and highlights a sense of loss, particularly in a community sense.

It is no wonder then that this word, in all its facets, was chosen to designate the day of national mourning recommended by the *Bringing them Home* Report published in April 1997, which was inaugurated on 26 May 1998. Many Australians still vividly recall the Sorry Day of the year 2000, when all over the nation marches for reconciliation took place, with around 250,000 people joining the walk for reconciliation across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Then Prime Minister, John Howard, however, refused to apologize on behalf of the nation.

So the "Sorry" of the title alludes to the shame and blame, regret and sorrow of a nation. Not just for this, but for the whole issue of White intervention in Aboriginal lives. However, the author does not presume to artificially construct an Aboriginal voice. The narrative is told from the perspective of Perdita Keene, a white woman reflecting on her years growing up on a cattle station in the remote outback of Western Australia in the 1930s and 40s. This is where her father, the frustrated and embittered English anthropologist Nicholas Keene, has come to live. He is employed by the Chief Protector of Aborigines to do fieldwork on the tribes near Broome and thus to indirectly contribute to the policies that involve the indignities that they become subject to. He is accompanied by his disconsolate, unstable wife, Stella. Their daughter, Perdita, who is wise beyond her years, is for them "a mistake, a slightly embarrassing intervention". Stella is appalled and distraught by the conditions she is forced to live in, out there in the vastness of a harsh environment. She finds solace in her obsession for Shakespeare, thus neglecting her daughter. Nicholas finds the child distasteful. Perdita is isolated and unloved.

The barrenness of Perdita's family relations stands in stark contrast to the warmth and welcome she finds in the Aboriginal community:

> If it had not been for the Aboriginal women who raised me, I would never have known what it is like to lie against a breast, to sense skin as a gift, to feel the throb of a low pulse at the base of the neck... (4).

Perdita develops deep friendships with the deaf-mute Billy Trevor, son of the cattle-station owner, and Mary, the "half-caste" Aboriginal girl called in to look after Perdita during her mother's absences in a lunatic asylum and on whom Perdita looks as a beloved sister. Mary has been brought up in a convent, a "removed" child. She has the advantage of some education, but enjoys none of the rights or protection that a white child would. The fact of her removal, however, is not made into an issue in the narrative (32).

The story is also by way of being a murder mystery that, although eventually solved, remains without the satisfaction of justice being restored – the wrongs remain because of silence. Indeed, the narrative opens with the descent of silence on the protagonists on the day Perdita's father dies:

> A whisper: sssshh. The thinnest vehicle of breath. This is a story that can only be told in a whisper. There is a hush to difficult forms of knowing, an abashment, a sorrow, an inclination towards silence. My throat is misshapen with all it now carries... I think the muzzle of time has made me thus, has deformed my mouth, my voice, my

BDD-A20244 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:25 UTC)

> wanting to say... 'Don't tell them,' she said. That was all: don't tell them (3).

Perdita's speechlessness after the traumatic events of that day symbolises the unspeakable nature of the events that the silence conceals. She is only ten years old when she witnesses how her father, Nicholas, is stabbed to death. He had a brutal streak and obtained his sexual gratification from forcing himself on the Aboriginal girls working at the station. Mary, Perdita's sister-friend, confesses to the crime and is imprisoned, while Perdita subsides into speechlessness, completely blocking out all memory of the event. The varying grades of speechlessness in the story take on an allegorical significance, representing the varying degrees of knowing and acknowledgement that a society can demonstrate. Billy, who also witnesses the crime, is mute and thus cannot speak, Mary consciously chooses not to speak, Perdita is so traumatised that she either loses her ability to speak at all or cannot articulate without stuttering. Stella chooses to subside into a "feeble minded" state, restricting her saner utterances to the beauty of Shakespeare's words or theatrical imitations of it. Although bit by bit, with the gentle help of the Russian speech therapist Dr Oblov, Perdita manages to peel back the skin of the past and rediscover her voice, what is revealed ultimately returns to the unspoken sphere and remains a secret. And Perdita misses her own opportunity to say sorry:

> Although it was offered, there was no atonement, there was no reparation. That was the point, Perdita would realise much later, at which, in humility, she should have said 'sorry'... (204)

Silence maintains its hold. The narrative reflects how silence can manifest itself in many forms and stem from many causes.

Not only are speech and the inability to communicate features of the narrative, but also modes of communication themselves. The written word, for instance, plays a role as consoler to both Stella, in her pathological identification with Shakespeare, whom she quotes to articulate her emotional state or rage against her own impotence, and Perdita, who immerses herself in her books. Ironically, she later manages to regain her voice only by quoting her mother's Shakespeare, by uttering constructed phrases, words that initially are not her own. Billy lip-reads to orient himself in his silent world, communicating with gestures in response to the voiceless words, for him mere movements of the mouth. When Perdita loses her ability to articulate, she communicates by writing notes on a notepad, and later when Billy starts to learn sign language, she learns it, too, in order to be able to converse with Billy's wife, Pearl, who is a deaf-mute as well. When Mary also learns sign language from a fellow inmate at the prison, the four friends find a mode of communication that frees them from the spoken or written word, furnishes them with "embodied tokens", a private space and "the secrecy of their meanings". This switching of modes presented in the narrative contrasts the beauty and control of artistic composition and "high culture" with the everyday insufficiency of words, with their incapacity to truly frame the literally unspeakable. As Jones herself puts it, it demonstrates "language in excess and language in deficit" (Jones & Cawston 2007).

The stifling events in this narrative are underpinned by reports of the War as both a distant and a lived experience, subtly hinting at other crimes and other inhumanities that remain "muzzled" and unarticulated. This puts the events on a more universal plain: "My father had been killed when the siege of Leningrad began...

BDD-A20244 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:25 UTC)

This was during Stalin's scorched earth policy; and it was when Jews were ordered to wear yellow stars" (Jones 100). Perdita associates the grief of these far places with her own misery, and again with the incapacity to articulate it:

> I was filled with wild loneliness, guilt and grief. I thought I would die for all that remained unexpressed. There was a murder of Jews at Kiev... with indecent, childish misunderstanding, I attached emotionally to the name Kiev, thinking it was special enough to contain my vast, private woe (102).

The individual events of this private fate assume historical proportions and the silences of past atrocities emerge in an almost palpable form.

Finally, the body as the site of the exercise of control and the involuntary expression of deeper emotions emerges as a theme. Nicholas vents his frustration and compensates for his sense of inadequacy by raping the station cook and later Mary, objectifying their bodies and inscribing his will onto them. Conversely, Mary's position does not allow her the opportunity to resist the debasement or remove herself from the source of her abuse. Thus she is not the proprietor of her own physical self. Perdita's horror and sense of guilt are physically expressed when her throat constricts and her mouth refuses to articulate her words in response to the events she has witnessed. And Nicholas' body becomes the object on which outrage and resistance are ultimately carried out in the most violent of terms, uniting those present in "such a deformity of fellowship" (194), particularly the two girls: "The sticky stuff of my father's life bound us like sisters" (3).

Jones' writing has been accused of being contrived and self-conscious at times. Certainly, *Sorry* is well structured, not a word appears to be wasted, and the symbolism is deliberate and thoughtful. Yet there are no jarring notes: constellations that might seem improbable in reality are arrived at with a naturalness in the text, and the language is haunting, lyrical and flowing. Although the title may raise the expectation of some kind of overt political preaching, this is never the case. Jones examines the themes of memory and forgetting, of speech and silence, of retribution and reconciliation, without overtly politicising the matter. Ultimately, the overwhelming impression that this novel leaves is one of sincerity. And if an individual fate is contingent on so many silences hindering the opportune moment to utter the words, then what difficulty must a whole nation have? Gail Jones' novel allows us an insight into the silence and gently reminds us to take the opportunity to say "sorry" while we can.[1]

References

1. Jones, Gail. *Sorry*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007.
2. Jones, Gail and Rob Cawston. *Gail Jones in Conversation with Rob Cawston*. www.opendemocracy.net/podcast/gailjones.mp3. Accessed 9 May 2009.

[1]There is an appropriate postscript to the publication of Jones' novel: On 13 February 2008, the newly installed Australian government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd finally found the words to say Australia's "Sorry". After much deliberation a formal apology was issued to the Indigenous peoples of Australia. The full text is at House of Representatives Hansard (2008-02-20): http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2008-02-20/0194/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf.

BDD-A20244 © 2009 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:00:25 UTC)