The Meanings and Functions of Silence in the Literary Work of Neagoe Basarab

Florentina NICOLAE
Ovidius University of Constanța

Abstract: *This paper examines the meanings of silence in one of the most important texts of Old Romanian literature,* The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius. *The work, written by the Wallachian prince Neagoe Basarab around 1520, is an example of Orthodox and Byzantine rhetoric. I am interested here in analyzing the meanings of silence, its ability to express various functions, and the forms in which silence can be conceptualized in this famous text of a both parenetical and Orthodox nature.*

Keywords: *Old Romanian literature, silence, function, meaning, communication*

Neagoe Basarab, Wallachian prince between 1512 and 1521, is one of those scholarly rulers – alongside Petru Cercel, Constantin Brâncoveanu, and Dimitrie Cantemir – with pioneering actions in Romanian culture. His only work, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*,[1] falls into the parenetic genre so valued by the Byzantine scholars. Ștefan Ciobanu wrote about this masterpiece that it is "the moral-religious and philosophical encyclopedia of the past, in which all the old wisdom, all the religious and political erudition of the old times concentrates" (*Enciclopedia* 207). In the *Encyclopedia of Old Romanian Literature*, Gheorghe Mihăilă, to whom we owe the first scientific edition of the Slavonic original of the work, wrote: "The informed analysis of *The Teachings* shows us that they are the result of a manner of elaboration in which the art of collage and anthology of texts comes in, wherewith the author could express and at the same time substantiate his own ideas through the authority of Holy Scripture and the great names of patristics. The first part is conceived as a gradual initiation of the prince's son into theological, moral and political issues, made through a series of texts, chosen from the Old Testament Books of the Kings, from the *Panegyric to Saints Constantine and Helena by Patriarch Euthymius of Tarnovo*, in which the ideal portrait of the Christian prince is synthesized, from the so popular and appreciated medieval novel *Barlaam and Josaphat* and from the writings of the great Fathers of the Church John Chrysostom and Ephrem the Syrian. This way of education through pedagogical reading, artistically prepared and accompanied by the author's personal comments, revealing the morality and use of each proposed text for meditation, is unique in the parenetic literature of Byzantium and the Eastern world and strongly

[1] Unless mentioned otherwise, the quotations used in this paper – translated by Gheorghe Mihăilă – come from *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab. Ediţie facsimilată după unicul manuscris păstrat* [*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius. Facsimile Ediiton of the Only Extant Manuscript*], edited and translated into Romanian by G. Mihăilă.

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

emphasizes the originality of the Romanian author in all the literature of this kind" (*Enciclopedia* 436).

Like many texts considered "literary" in Old Romanian literature, *The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius* is a work that cannot be considered merely a fiction, but one of an obviously interdisciplinary nature, combining both literature and theology. Neagoe Basarab teaches his son how a prince should behave in a world in perpetual danger, as the leader of a small country, always under the duress from external threats, coming from states of various confessions. Neagoe unequivocally unites the political and diplomatic life of a Wallachian prince, with the religious, Eastern Orthodox life. All the prince's actions – sanctioned by the ancestral ritual of anointing – must be circumscribed to the Eastern Orthodox ontological code, which, on the one hand, offers solutions to solve all kinds of dilemmas at the institutional level, and on the other hand, avoids the danger of a behavior pattern that could endanger the young prince's authority inside and outside the borders.

In this study, we will analyze the work, from the perspective of the meanings of silence, of its functions and importance, in relation to the word spoken loudly or just thought. We will seek to identify what makes silence capable of bearing different meanings and expressing different functions, what mechanisms the interactants use in order to reach these meanings or these functions of silence and/or reach what is said (Jaworski 81).

In *Silence: The Phenomenon and Its Ontological Significance* (1980), phenomenologist Bernard P. Dauenhauer resumes Max Picard's thesis in *The World of Silence* and notes that "silence is an ontological principle" (Wardley vii). Referring to almost every aspect of human activity and the world in which it exists, silence is one of the "forces" that make up the human world. According to Kenneth Wardley,

> Bernard Dauenhauer summarises the thesis of Max Picard's *The World of Silence* thus: silence is an ontological principle; in belonging to almost every dimension of human activity and the world which it inhabits, it is one of the "forces" that constitute the human world, a constitutive principle distinct from (although associated with) other forces such as spirit and word. (Wardley 5)

Not only in the Christian religion, silence is associated with a special type of speech, represented by prayer as a discourse of faith and as a form of direct communication with the divinity. In this regard, the complexity of silence is related to the complexity of the discourse (Wardley v). The principle of silent communication with the divinity is set forth in numerous passages in the Bible. For example, in the Ecclesiastes, the communication container is the heart: e.g. "I said in mine heart" (Eccles. 2:1, KJV), "I sought in mine heart" (Eccles. 2:3), "Then I

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

said in my heart" (Eccles. 2:15); so it is in the *Gospel of Matthew* (6:6), which has generated a tradition of "communicative silence" (Jaworski 104) specific to Christianity: "But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matthew 6:6). This principle was synthesized by one of the great contemporary Orthodox Romanian thinkers, Arsenie Papacioc: "After all, a deep prayer means deep silence" (Papacioc 120).

According to Jaworski (82), the different functions of silence "can be further accounted for by referring to another ontological metaphor, in the sense of Lakoff and Johnson (1980)." On this reading, "silence is a container. This metaphor embodies another manner of our perception of silence: as a state" (Jaworski 82).

In Neagoe Basarab's text, this function of silence as a container is illustrated in the following examples:

> He taught those in the army in the following way: "In battles, you should go out in the field, in a clean place and there, firstly meditate *in silence*. And thus you should pray to the Lord in one voice, as befitting, and you should know that the Lord does good to all and raise up your hands to the Lord and speak like this…." (Basarab 231, emphasis added)
> And *he shut himself alone on certain days, speaking with the one God*, and bending on his knees with humble prayers, he asked to receive the promised goods. (Basarab 233, emphasis added)

In the first example, we are dealing with what Picard called "creative silence," where there is no separation and no distinction between the individual and the community, because silence is assumed together (Picard 52).

These examples show a spatial conceptualization of silence, regarded as "part of a physical setting of a given activity" (Jaworski 83). In these examples, the physical framework of the activity (the same activity) is contextualized according to the actors: the open field for soldiers, the room for an individual. Just as the verbal communication can occur either in a group ("you should pray to the Lord in one voice") or alone ("he was praying"), silence too, receiving the same function, may be either a collective process ("meditate in silence") or individual ("he shut himself alone"). From this ontological perspective, silence "provides a space for dialogue" (Wardley 7); in Neagoe Basarab's text, silence provides the binding context of intimate and effective conversation with the divinity. Max Picard reaches the same conclusion in his work *The World of Silence*, where, theologically speaking, silence is associated with divine eternity and majesty:

> Here in silence is the Holy Wilderness, because the wilderness and the building of God are one. There is no movement here to be regulated by the law: existence and activity are one in silence. It is as though the whole orbit

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

> of a star were to be suddenly concentrated into a single light: that is the unity of existence and activity concentrated in silence.
>
> Silence gives to things inside it something of the power of its own autonomous being. The autonomous being in things is strengthened in silence. That which is developable and exploitable in things vanishes when they are in silence.
>
> Through this power of autonomous being, silence points to a state where only being is valid: the state of the Divine. The mark of the Divine in things is preserved by their connection with the world of silence. (Picard 4)

Silence in meaningful if communication is perceived or expected to take place. In addition, silence does not get meaning if it occurs at times when communication is not supposed to take place, "because no one then searches for a context in which it would have any contextual effects. On the other hand, when communication is expected or perceived to be taken place, silence becomes potentially relevant, provided that the audience (addressee) wants to pay attention to the assumptions" (Jaworski 91). In most situations where silence is or might be relevant, in Neagoe Basarab's text, the addressee of the message is God. All of Neagoe's lessons of behavior to his son are circumscribed to the biblical message, in which maintaining communication with the divinity is fundamental. If communication is not desired by God because inappropriate behavior makes the locutor undesirable, God interrupts the communication with the latter irrespective of his privileged ethnic status (Jewish, Greek) and moreover transforms Himself from recipient into sender of the message. To put it otherwise, God reveals Himself only to those worthy of the divine message, thus ensuring the continuity of communication with the people:

> "The wedding is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy!" [Matthew 22:8] It was, therefore, necessary above all, not to let anybody be ashamed of the answer for any blame. And because He knew that, He came firstly to these ones and sent [messengers], *shutting their mouths* and teaching us to fulfill all by ourselves... (Basarab 239, emphasis added)

This example is translated from the original Slavonic version of the text. In the oldest Romanian version, dated before 1716, the Romanian translator amplified the interruption of communication through the divine will, introducing the verb (in my English translation) "to plug," which suggests the annihilation of any chance of resuming communication: "Behold, He came Himself, then He sent his messengers too, and with this He *constrains them and plugs their mouths*, and teaches us to fill all of his [wishes]" (Basarab 2001: 103, emphasis added).

If there is an indissoluble connection between speech and silence, because the former cannot exist in the absence of the latter, silence can exist independently

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

of speech. According to the Bible, the world was created by the power of the Divine Word, meaning that silence has no creative force in the absence of the word. The world in silence, until the appearance of the Word, is the world before Creation, a world impenetrable to the human mind, "a world of menace and danger to man" (Picard 13).

Conceptualizing silence as a metaphor relates it to human language as a link between humans and divinity. The degradation of the speech organ entails the loss of the ability to express oneself, to have access to God's wisdom. Physical degradation becomes a metaphor for the moral one, as non-communicative silence symbolizes the divine loss of spiritual life:

> Oh, misfortune! Where is the beauty of your face? Behold, it is blackened! Where is the beautiful hew and where are the red lips? Behold, they have withered! Where are the bright and beautiful eyes? Behold, they have melted! Where is the beauty of the hair? Behold, it has fallen! Where is the smooth neck? Behold, it is broken! *Where is the fast tongue? Behold, it is silent!* Where is the ornament of hands? Behold, it has broken! Where are the high-priced outfits? Behold, they have rotten! Where is the flower of age: Behold, it has perished! Where are the myrrh and the aromas? Behold, they have fallen! Where is the joy of youth? Behold, it has passed! And, in a word, where is the dreamy man? Behold, he is dust, for all he was dust! (Basarab 249, emphasis added)
>
> For our tears are helpful here, as long as we are still alive, and after death we cannot work for God anymore, for the dead do not believe, *the dead do not confess*, the dead do not work, the dead do not find any mystery, the dead have no wisdom, the dead cannot get any reward. The dead one who was not baptized is condemned, even before judgment. Because the alive one and the healthy one will praise the Lord. (Basarab 391, emphasis added)

Assuming the guilt of violating the Christian precepts and becoming aware that there is no longer any possibility of restoring the divine order of things makes the guilty one silent. There is a silence mixed with pain. "On the river of tears, man travels back into silence" (Picard 59):

> But he kept his silence, for he could not dare answer; he had defiled his garment of faith and baptism with the defilement of the defilements (Basarab 237).
>
> To clothe yourself with scruffy clothes means having an unhealthy life, running away from judgment. That's why *he was silent* [and then he said]... And if he has nothing to say about his fault, then he will condemn himself, and thus he will be engulfed by unimaginable torments. (Basarab 241-243, emphasis added)

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

> This is why, my beloved, let's hurry to work for God while we are still alive, so that the time may not come and let us know that we have not worked yet for God, because if the time will find us unrepentant, *then what answer shall we give to our Lord?* (Basarab 391, emphasis added)

> Because if we wished to comfort ourselves, *our mouths should not start speaking one to another*, because they would be filled with sighs and with the eternal fire. (Basarab 401-403, emphasis added)

We note, therefore, two meanings that Neagoe Basarab gives to the notion of silence. One is communicative silence, which provides a permanent connection with Divinity and involves self-retreat and intense spiritual activity. The other is non-communicative silence, metaphorised either by the image of the rotting body or by the inability of the sinful man to express himself through speech.

Maurice Blanchot, in *The Infinite Conversation*, says that "silence exists; it is not death and it is not speech… it is something that is neither indifference nor discourse" (qtd. in Wardley ix). Unlike this perception, we found that in Neagoe Basarab's *Teachings*, the *total* absence of the word (i.e. pronounced, or associated with the internal, spiritual activity) acquires religious significance, being equivalent to the absence of faith, to the inability to address the divinity, and therefore to find relief or comfort. Moreover, it is especially equivalent to eternal death and to the lack of access to a heavenly existence.

Works Cited

Basarab, Neagoe, *Invăţăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*. *Ediţie facsimilată după unicul manuscris păstrat* [*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius. Facsimile Edition of the Only Extant Manuscript*]. Transcription, translation into Romanian and introductory study by Prof. dr. G. Mihăilă, with a preface by Dan Zamfirescu. Bucureşti: Editura Roza Vânturilor, 1996.

Basarab, Neagoe, *Invăţăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie* [*The Teachings of Neagoe Basarab to His Son Theodosius*]. Chişinău: Editura Litera Internaţional, 2001.

Jaworski, Adam. *The Power of Silence. Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. In *Language and Language Behaviors.* Vol. I. Newbury Park, CA.: Sage, 1993.

The King James Bible. 1611. Online at <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/1611-Bible>.

Picard, Max. *The World of Silence.* Preface by Gabriel Marcel. London: Harvill Press, 1948. Online at

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)

<https://herbertbaioco.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/the-world-of-silence-max-picard.pdf>.

Papacioc, Arsenie. *Ne vorbeşte Părintele Arsenie* [*Father Arsenie Is Speaking to Us*]. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. Tg. Neamţ: Editura Mănăstirea Sihăstria, 2010. Online: <https://doxologia.ro/cuvinte-duhovnicesti>.

Simion, Eugen, ed. *Enciclopedia literaturii române vechi* [*Encyclopedia of Old Romanian Literature*]. Fundaţia Naţională pentru Ştiinţă şi Artă. Bucureşti: Editura Muzeului Naţional al Literaturii Române, 2018.

Wardley, Kenneth Jason. "Learning to Be Silent: Theological and Philosophical Reflections on Silence and Transcendence." Conference paper. *Culture and Transcendence: Shifting Religion and Spirituality in Philosophy, Theology, Art and Politics VU Amsterdam, 28-29th October 2010*, pp.1-25. Online at <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/4046>.

BDD-A31685 © 2019 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.169 (2026-11-07 03:06:35 UTC)