

## **Wordless Thought: Reflections on Language and Silence** by **Rhiannon Grant**

### **Abstract**

'Wordless Thought: reflections on language and silence' will offer, in words, some thoughts about the wordless parts of the 'Quaker language' and how they relate to the Skyspace, and also some thoughts about the Light and how the Skyspace relates to the words which Quakers do use. Along the way, it will use some ideas from Wittgenstein and consider the Skyspace as a physical space which encourages certain - perhaps Quakerly - practices.

When I was first asked to speak here on the subject of 'wordless thought', I found it a little ironic – firstly because my research is about words and religious language generally, and secondly because I'd been asked to talk about it. However, it is incontestable that wordless practices, especially silent waiting worship, are central to Quakerism, and it might be that they should be or sometimes are without thought – there's an old Quaker joke about someone who stood up to give ministry, beginning with the words, "Friends, as I've been sitting here I've been thinking..." and someone else said from the back of the room, "That's where you've gone wrong!"

However, talking about our practices, wordless or verbal, is pretty important too – and it seems to me that a lot of non-verbal or wordless elements are actually important to the Wittgensteinian picture of language with which I work, and so what I'd like to offer you today are two things: some thoughts about the wordless parts of our Quaker language and how that relates to the Skyspace, and then some thoughts about the Light and how the Skyspace relates to the words which Quakers do use.

To begin with, I want to introduce to you the picture of language which I use. It's based on the work of Wittgenstein – mainly his later work, especially the *Philosophical Investigations*. One story says that Wittgenstein was inspired to return to the subject of language and communication, having previously thought that his first book solved all of the problems in philosophy, when he met a friend on the train. This friend made a gesture – most versions of the story have it as the Italian chin-flicking gesture – and asked Wittgenstein: what's the logical form of that? In response, Wittgenstein let go of his previous understanding of language, in which

propositions, statement, were models or pictures of the world and words, mostly thought of as nouns, were learned by ostensive definition – that is, pointing.

Instead, he began to talk about meaning as something created by use – so that in order to understand a word, we need to look at who uses it, when they use it, what the context is, what else is happening at the time, and so forth. Norman Malcolm says that, "By careful description of the use of a word, [the philosopher] will show how this same word changes in meaning from one context to another"<sup>1</sup>. So, we'll need to give careful consideration to the multiple previous and relevant contexts of any particular term. When we do this, we'll also need to bear in mind another point Malcolm makes: that there may be "no *unity* behind the irregularity" of the various usages. Wittgenstein uses the example – handily enough if we want to talk about wordless thought – of the word 'thinking'. He says that "it is not to be expected of this word ['thinking'] that it should have a unified employment; instead the opposite should be expected"<sup>2</sup>. Because there's no essence of the word, just a collection of uses, the boundaries are free to shift and change. Although this can seem like a problem, in fact it's necessary to the continued vitality of language, and it doesn't present a communication problem in everyday life. Malcolm points out that:

*We don't often get into quarrels as to whether some object is or isn't to be called a 'chair'. This is surprising since the things we call 'chairs' differ so greatly in shape, size, materials, structure, etc.*<sup>3</sup>

In other words, we have an "agreement in judgement"<sup>4</sup> about what constitutes a chair within our usual way of life, and we can move forward from there.

Justifications for the way we use words exist within our ways of speaking and can't be removed from that context in order to justify the use of particular words or phrases, or to put it another way, the rules for how to use words only make sense within the game we play with them<sup>5</sup>. If language and the patterns of language use we encounter – all the words, the gestures, the symbols on street signs, and so forth – are 'just there', just part of life, we need to observe and understand them but we

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*, ed. Peter Winch (London: Routledge, 1993), 78.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 47; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 112.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?*: 62.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 63., quoted from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 242.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," in *Thought and Knowledge* (Cornell University, 1977), 208.

should be wary of pushing too hard to 'explain' them – they are the way they are because we use them the way we use them, and that's fine<sup>6</sup>.

What has this picture of language got to do with James Turrell's Skyspace? Well, for starters, if wordless things – gestures, artefacts, and perhaps even art, and architecture, for example – behave as part of our language, then the Skyspace is a kind of remark; a statement, perhaps, which suggests a certain response: like 'good morning' or 'hello'. Not everyone will have the same response to it, but some are common: craning the neck to look up, taking a seat to spend time with it, and for many people, falling silent. It is, of course, possible to speak inside the Skyspace, and visitors who come to it simply as a sculpture often do. Visitors who come with an awareness of the religious or meditative possibilities of the space, however, seem to find it natural to fall into a silent watching. This is partly to do with what we might call the grammar of the space, the rules which, although we could break them, help us to make sense of it.

It's worth pausing for a moment here to compare the Skyspace with the grammar of other buildings and spaces so that we get a feel for the way I am using this term. Consider, for example, a theatre, a classroom, or a church. The ways in which the seating is arranged directs our attention: in a cinema, towards the screen, and in a lecture theatre, towards the front. Some classrooms, however, are arranged in other ways – tables can be placed 'cabaret style' for group work and at one time octagonal science benches were in fashion. Similarly, the classical arrangement of a church has lines of chairs or benches facing the front, but some groups, including Quakers, prefer to sit in a circle or rectangle so that people face each other. The Skyspace here has, from this point of view, two notable features: firstly, people sit around in a square, all at the same height, but – secondly – they don't necessarily look at one another, because the outward slope of the lower wall invites them to lean back and look upwards.

In the Skyspace, we look upwards towards the sky, which by a trick of perspective seems to have been brought down close to meet us. In a Quaker Meeting for Worship, we wait on the Light, which somehow is there to meet us.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 216.

For those here who are not Quakers – and perhaps to iron out some possible misunderstandings with some who are – I want to describe here, briefly, what I think is happening in a Meeting for Worship. (I think some of this section will overlap with what Helen Meads will say later, but it is probably still useful to get two different perspectives on it.)

Quaker Meetings for Worship are based in silence, in listening and waiting on God, or the Light, or the Spirit, or whatever you call it. (If you're thinking just now that those things are not all the same, or that it's funny to want to list them like that, all I'll say for now is that I think you're asking very good questions.) In that silent mode of sitting and waiting, people try and get in touch with something, a something which for now it seems most apt to call the Light. Some people think that the Light is an external thing – a God-out-there, perhaps, or a Collective Unconscious – which shines in on you in Meeting for Worship; others think of it as an internal thing – that of God in you, or the Inner Buddha Nature, or your best self – which is freed to arise in Meeting for Worship. These are, fortunately, not contradictory understandings, and we can think of God in – to use John Robinson's language – both heights and depths without a particular problem, because we know that all our metaphors are inadequate and God is more than all this.

The image of the Light is also a very old Quaker one. George Fox, one of the founders of the Quaker movement, described his spiritual experiences as "pure openings of the Light"<sup>7</sup>. Quakers have often spoken about the Inward or the Inner Light, and when Ben Pink Dandelion asked Quakers to choose their favourite way to describe God from a list of ten, 'the inner Light' 'won' by a fair margin.<sup>8</sup> What does this Light do? It can reveal our weaknesses and sin: in the 1650s, it showed Thomas Ellwood "the evil of [his] doings". It can overcome these failings: George Fox saw "an infinite ocean of love and light" overcoming "an ocean of darkness and death". In the words of a current Quaker text, *Advices and Queries* – regularly read in our Meetings – God's Light "shows us our darkness and brings us to new life".<sup>9</sup> We also speak of

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<sup>7</sup> Quaker Faith & Practice, 19.04

<sup>8</sup> My completely unstatistical research has 'Spirit' slightly ahead and 'God' also up there in the top three, but never mind that now.

<sup>9</sup> QF&P, 1.01.1

'holding in the Light' a person, a situation, a meeting – where in other traditions it would be more common to speak of praying for them.

Again, what does this have to do with the Skyspace? The Skyspace draws our attention – as I said earlier, through the grammar of its structure it draws our attention to this one square of sky and the light that is in it. Sitting in the Skyspace, we lean back and look up to observe the changing patterns of light and shade in the sky, something we might ordinarily ignore. The inward Light is perhaps like this – something we might ignore, but which, with the right help, we can usefully attend to. The light in a Skyspace is a physical, small-L light, which shines from the sky down to us, while the Light in a Meeting for Worship is a capital-L Light, a mystical force which is from the depths of our beings and beyond us all, but nevertheless the comparison may be useful. Metaphors are often enriched by experience of the concrete things to which they refer.

In both cases, of course, sometimes the light does not shine. From the Skyspace we can also observe the night, grey cloudy skies, and rainfall; most who attend Meeting for Worship regularly will have had the experience of a dry Meeting or a dry month, a time when the connection does not seem to happen and just sitting there waiting is unproductive. If we are lucky – or perhaps strong-willed – we might manage to draw something from even these dark nights of the soul, but this does not necessarily make them any less frustrating.

When I was first working on this paper – and having something of a dry and unproductive time of it – I ran a google search to see where this phrase 'wordless thought' had come from. I knew that James Turrell used it, which indeed he does several times, in a couple of much-quoted remarks. In one he says that he seeks to create "an experience of wordless thought" and connects that with the way that a Skyspace "make[s] the quality and sensation of light itself something really quite tactile"<sup>10</sup>. Here, the words in the thought seem to have been replaced by sensation – an effect I associate with the way that the spiritual Light of Meeting for Worship can come like a hug, or a blanket, or a feeling of being at home.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.imamuseum.org/collections/artwork/acton-turrell-james>

In another statement, Turrell says that he's seeking to create "an atmosphere that can be consciously plumbed with seeing... like the wordless thought that comes from looking in a fire"<sup>11</sup>. This state is meditative – there's a stillness, a waiting, an alert watching – but the object being watched – the fire, the sky, the Inward Light – also admits of movement. A fire burns down, but it also shifts and throws off sparks along the way. The sky remains, but it fades through brightness and darkness, clouds and sun and rain. Such changes also happen during a Meeting for Worship – someone may speak, a fresh part of our continuing revelation may be revealed, or our individual perspective or feeling about an issue may develop in a new direction.

Silence and art, like gestures, are parts of our language, broadly understood. The Skyspace can be understood as a comment which speaks not only in the language of the world of art – although it undoubtedly does draw on these traditions, the history and practice of sculpture and especially abstract art – but also as a comment in the language of Quakerism, a remark which relates closely to the other things which Quakers 'say' – with or without words.

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**Rhiannon Grant** has been going to Quaker meetings all her life and despite the occasional attempt has not left the Society yet. She is currently a PhD student at the University of Leeds where she is studying philosophical and theological perspectives on religious languages, using Wittgenstein's ideas as a base and Quaker ways of speaking as a key example. Her new project also uses this research to provide workshops to Quakers which explore our ways of speaking about God, the Divine, the Spirit, or whatever you want to call it.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://rodencrater.com/james>