Silence as Language in 
Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

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In *To the Lighthouse*, messages are often expressed in silence. The world of language is constituted by the spoken and the unspoken. While the spoken explicitly come to the reader's attention, the unspoken implicitly require the reader to verbalize signs in silence. Like an attentive music-listener who catches the muffled twangs of the strings in the tutti of the orchestra, a reader must detect what lies between the words and in the margin of the text. Silence can be a sign which is to be transcribed into language. The reader must capture the inarticulate sign and help to concretize or to connect the gaps in the text. The language blanks are the locales where the most rewarding meanings are nurtured because, as the Chinese says, "the meaning exists outside the words."

"The meaning outside the words" pervades the novel, *To the Lighthouse*. What the reader faces is a world where the written refer to the unwritten, the said point to the unsaid, and the present presuppose the absent. The blanks in this novel challenge the reader's insight to unravel the mystery of language and expand the referentiality of signs. Virginia Woolf observes that Jane Austen's literary power lies in her provision of the unwritten parts in the text:

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. Always the stress is laid upon characters....The turns and twists of the dialogue keep us on the tenterhooks of suspense. Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future....Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen's greatness.

Wolfgang Iser in his *The Implied Reader* states that what Woolf finds in Austen also applies to herself. Both Austen's and Woolf's literary competence is demonstrated in the language blanks where the reader is stimulated to look beyond the known for the unknown, beyond the certain for the uncertain.

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With "turns and twists" of language, the text claims a world of silence. The turns and twists may suggest juxtapositions of elements and the new combination of words or images effect the metonymical transfer. The words or images interproject upon each other and exalt each other to be signs. Yet in a sense an image appears to be neutral, exempt from connotative tinge, it is the reader that reads it into a sign. In a word, a sign in silence is nourished in contextuality. In Section I of To the Lighthouse, a sign looms in a passage describing Paul's and Minta's narration of their experiences on the beach: Minta lost her brooch on the seashore and they failed to find it. In the conversation, Paul discloses his secret motive to look for the brooch again early next morning and then he turns his eyes to where Minta sits, "laughing beside Mrs. Ramsay." Minta's laughing betokens that a kind of improved relationship between her and Paul has been established on the seashore although this message is delivered without words. The narrator in describing this changed relationship also avoids explicit remark; rather, he lets it be perceived and received as a sign by a consciousness, Mrs. Ramsay.

This image of laughing is also subject to the reader's reception. Facing a text, the reader for a moment experiences a combination of syntagmatic reading and paradigmatic reading. While syntagmatic reading observes the objective temporal sequence of the text, paradigmatic reading breaks and subjectifies objective physical time. In syntagmatic reading, the temporality of the reader follows the spatiality of the text, but in paradigmatic reading the present and the past are juxtaposed and readjusted into a new order. When the reader encounters a text, he puts it in a specific context and refers it to the newly-established temporal sequence. The reader at this moment shuttles between moments of time and reads an image into a sign. Regarding the image of laughing discussed above, the reader's impression of Paul's and Minta's relation in the early reading superimposes itself upon the present moment of reading, thus Minta's laughing at this moment is rendered into a sign of their closer relationship. It seems that their closer relationship is treasured as a secret but an unconscious laughing gives out a sign open for reading or interpretation. An image or an expression is contextualized in a signifying chain and all the meaning generated is a sign expecting to be articulated.

Human relationships in To the Lighthouse, as that of Lily and Mr. William Bankes which the narrator specifies on page 201, "were left unsaid." The flow of consciousnesses silently surges back and forth against another consciousness without explicit words. When Mr. Ramsay is reading and Mrs. Ramsay, knitting beside him, ponders over variety of things, they exchange occasional glances, marking their consciousness of the existence of the other and yet suggesting the sufficiency of the lone self. Language, the epitome of communication, befalls upon each other in silence:
Their eyes met for a second; but they did not want to speak to each other. They had nothing to say, but something seemed, nevertheless, to go from him to her.

(p. 137)

Later Mr. Ramsay slaps his thighs and this movement appears to Mrs. Ramsay as a sign to check or impede further communication. The slapping, for Mrs. Ramsay, seems to say, "Don't interrupt me,...don't say anything; just sit there" (p. 137). When language is transformed into a gesture, it is subjected to the receiver's interpretation. The validity of message thins into ambiguity in the act of reading or interpretation. The fictional world of To the Lighthouse thus does not intend to confirm a fixed meaning; rather, it tries to demonstrate how a meaning is taking shape in communication. Reading and communication dissect a message, disperse it in different dimensions, and thus complicate the multiplicity of meanings.

With this kind of text, the reader's main interest is not to question what message is aired, but to examine how it is transmitted and disseminated. Whether Mr. Ramsay's slapping things really signifies his unwillingness for communication is still moot; consciousness receives the signal yet its decoding does not promise a re-appearance of the original pre-packaged message. The transmission of the message from consciousness to consciousness is not like the signal passing from a radio station to another station; in the former a message is tinged in the receiver's subjectification whereas in the latter the success of electronics nowadays almost guarantees perfect transmission without distortion or coloration. Thus when the unknown narrator comments on Mrs. Ramsay's translating the received message, the given metaphor tends to deconstruct itself. The narrator observes, "It was as if she had antennae trembling out from her, which, intercepting certain sentences, forced them upon her attention" (p. 123). Unlike the real electronic device, a pair of antennae, which can catch signals aired from the station without coloring the messages, the metaphorical antennae of consciousness intercept "certain sentences" and interpret them to the will of the self. The activity of interception again suggests that the gratified subjectification creates a meaning rather than recovers a pre-packaged meaning.

In intercepting a message, Mrs. Ramsay renders it into a sign although it is transmitted in silence. The reader also perceives that the self silently projects itself onto the message in the unwritten parts of the text. Language blanks resulting from silence thus at least set up two worlds which are respectively concretized by the character, the narrator and the reader. During this silent communication, sometimes Mrs. Ramsay expects Mr. Ramsay to say something even though her expectation is also conveyed in silence: "Say anything, she begged, looking at him, as if for help" (p. 141). Mr. Ramsay's response to her silent expectation is again silently expressed:
He was silent, swinging the compass on his watchchain to and fro, and thinking of Scott's novels and Balzac's novels. But through the crepuscular walls of their intimacy, for they were drawing together, involuntarily, coming side by side, quite close, she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind; and he was beginning now that her thoughts took a turn he disliked--towards this "pessimism" as he called it--to fidget, though he said nothing, raising his hand to his forehead, twisting a lock of hair, letting it fall again.

(p. 141)

Mrs. Ramsay could read her husband's mind "though he said nothing." Language is transferred to a gesture from which Mrs. Ramsay comes to terms with a consciousness. Mr. Ramsay's "raising his hand to his forehead, twisting a lock of hair, letting it fall again" is interpreted by Mrs. Ramsay to be a sign of his dislike of her "pessimism." Mrs. Ramsay's expectation of Mr. Ramsay's saying something thus undergoes a tension surging turbulently yet silently between consciousnesses. The tension is to be released by something outspoken to resolve the dubious sign. Later Mr. Ramsay says, "you won't finish that stocking tonight"; and Mrs. Ramsay at this point again reads this sentence into a sign of relaxed tension:

That was what she wanted--the asperity in his voice reproofing her. If he says it's wrong to be pessimistic probably it is wrong, she thought; the marriage will turn out all right.

(p. 141)

Throughout this encounter, Mr. Ramsay emits silent gestures which are read into signs by an intentional consciousness. Mrs. Ramsay's confidence that "she could feel his mind like a raised hand" virtually betrays a consciousness imbued in his (or her) one-sided interpretation. The reality constructed in consciousness is different from the objective reality. In other words, in To the Lighthouse, the statement in narration (either of the narrator or of the character) is not a fact or truth; rather, it reflects a reading of a specific consciousness. What is validated is not a narrated concept; rather, whenever a concept is involved, the concept is open for multiplicity of readings.

In this light, characterization in the narrative actually reflects a perception of a specific consciousness. Critics who tend to "characterize" Mr. Ramsay as egoistical and tyrannical, for instance, are liable to fall into the trap of narrative. The narrator's voice as well as the character's perspective tries to impose itself on the consciousness of the receiver or the reader yet it does not claim a predominant authority. Narrative authority in To the Lighthouse in most cases deconstructs itself through reading and narration. Consciousness-reading in this novel blurs the distinction between the
observer and the observed. While a consciousness is interpreting
another consciousness, his interpretation or reading is again open for
another reading. The transference of reading or the multiplicity of
reading turns out to confuse or even to reverse the roles of the
observer and the observed. The reversal of the observer and the
observed in this novel often takes place in silence.

Perspectives in To the Lighthouse often shift from chapter to
chapter or from section to section. In a broader sense, Section II
entitled "Time Passes" which interludes the first and the third
sections separates moments, detaches perspectives and thus draws
contrasting times into play. Also, throughout the novel, with few
exceptions, the contiguous chapters change from the view of the
observer to that of the observed and vice versa. The Chapters in
Section III, for instance, except Chapter 6, all deal with the shifting
focuses: the observer and the observed in a specific chapter will
exchange their roles in the beginning of the following chapter. As the
observer comes to the camera eye of the observed, the subject and
the object merge into ambiguity. The narrator seems to renounce his
authority in his description of a specific observer; therefore, he
puts the observer in the spotlight of the observed's perspective. The
reversal of the roles implies that participations of different
consciousnesses are encouraged to multiply possible readings of a
phenomenon. While the narrator silently shifts its narrative focus and
reverses the roles of the observer and the observed, he literally
suggests that a specific narration is not necessarily a truth--it is
self-deviating and it is only a way of reading.

Since it only reflects a way of reading, its validity is continually
questioned when a reading changes into another reading or when the
subject of reading becomes the object of another reading. At the
dinner table, Charles Tansley thinks, "What damned rot they talk,"
when he lays down his spoon, but his consciousness immediately
comes to Lily's attention although Tansley's thinking is never
verbalized. What Lily catches is probably a gesture or a sign which
transforms silence into language. Lily's interpretation of that sign in
silence is that "he were determined to make sure of his meals.
Everything about him had that merge fizity, that bare unloveliness"
(p. 98). Conversely, Charles Tansley's penetration into Lily's
Briscoe's consciousness to confront her reading is explicit in this
passage:

"Oh, Mr. Tansley," she said, "do take me to the
Lighthouse with you. I should so love it."
She was telling lies he could see.

(p. 99)

In this passage, Tansley overhears what is unspoken from what is
spoken and perceives silence as language.
Silence and language alternate in communication and consciousness-reading. The receiver of a message bides his time to fill in the language blanks and provides a horizon of connectibility by reading silence into a communicative sign. In the above-mentioned scene regarding the lost brooch and Minta's laughing, there is another laughing worth scrutinizing. After Paul says that he is going to find the brooch early next morning, Lily offers, "Let me come with you" and Paul laughs. Paul's laughing at this moment is immediately translated into a sign in Lily's consciousness. At first Lily considers it to be a dubious sign: "He meant yes or no--either perhaps." Then she associates the laughing to a chuckle: "But it was the odd chuckle he gave, as if he had said" (pp. 117-18). Interpreted as an "odd chuckle," the laughing becomes an unkindly sign into which Lily in her reading injects a sense of bitterness. The sign, though unspoken, seems to say to her, "Throw yourself over the cliff if you like" (p. 118). The semantic dimension of the laughing swells in Lily's self-justified interpretation.

Lily's reading of this laughing of course in no way can claim its validity. This again points out the questionable nature of any narration in this novel. The combination of silence and language poses question to the relation between saying and meaning. When consciousness defines meaning, what one says does not designate what one means. A bar seems to exist between saying and meaning or between the signifier and the signified. In *To the Lighthouse*, the phenomenon ensuing from the "difference" between words and meaning pervades the novel. On page 23, the statement "One could not say what one meant" in which the narrator's voice is commingled with Lily's perspective bespeaks the nature of language in *To the Lighthouse*. While speaking continues to deviate from its course, meaning undergoes continual transformation. "Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low" (p. 202), and "one could say nothing to nobody" (p. 202). As words swerve from the course of intentionality, gestures or signs of language are open for the receiver's interpretation. Moreover, because of the "difference" between words and meaning, communication is mostly carried in silence. Silence sometimes is a dubious sign and yet it authorizes the receiver to subjectify the words.

The narrator gives a powerful metaphor to explain the nature of words:

The words seemed to be dropped into a well, where, if the waters were clear, they were also so extraordinarily distorting that, even as they descended, one saw them twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of the child's mind.

(p. 64)

Since words are "extraordinarily distorting" and twisting, the significance of communication does not lie in the transmission of an
original meaning but in the swelling of meaning. The deviative nature of language re-affirms the importance of the receiver in the act of communication. The receiver is endowed with certain liberty to perceive and to interpret words and yet it should be noted that his perception and interpretation, as stated above, also exposes openings for other interpretations.

Thus, a receiver like Mrs. Ramsay considers Mr. Ramsay's phrase-making, "Poor little place," to be a game (pp. 80-1). Her interpretation is partly derived from her reading of what comes before and after the phrase-making. In other words, she gropes for the unspoken in the spoken and relates a text to another text. It seems that in Mrs. Ramsay's consciousness, a decoding device is silently activated when Mr. Ramsay's words pass through it.

In this world of consciousness-reading, when language is dissected and reorganized in a specific consciousness, the reader should remind himself that any receiver's reading or perception virtually modifies the message in a linguistic utterance. Moreover, when silence is read as a sign, interpretation of a sign further diminishes the fixity of a message. The origin of the message eventually is obscured in transference from different addressees to different addressees. Language recurs in a consciousness and "one repeats words without being aware any longer who originally spoke them" (p. 180). The transmission of the message and its modification in an act of communication is the core of interest for a modern reader. The reader is more interested in how a message is expanded and received than in what the origin of the message is.

Seeing that a message is colored and subjectified by a consciousness, the reader should observe that the authenticity of a narration is often to be questioned. As to Paul's laughing as discussed above, for instance, the reader should keep in mind that Lily's interpretation of this laughing is not authoritative. Whether Paul means to be sarcastic or not cannot be ascertained in this narration; what the reader perceives, in this case, is not the attribute of Paul's laughing but Lily's one-sided consciousness-reading. The reader at this moment changes Lily's role as the observer to the observed. He questions the authenticity of a narration and provides possible multiple readings in the complex interpenetrating world of consciousness.

What stimulates the reader to participate in the unravelling of the mystery of consciousness-reading is silence—silence imbedded in words. The characters filter the spoken and catch the unspoken; similarly, the reader lends ears to what is unsaid in what has been said. Like the characters, the reader translates silence into a sign and constructs a world. So far as he can demonstrate his convincing power, he can proclaim a reality although it is not the reality. Reading in this way becomes creation.
Notes


5I strongly agree to James Hafley's argument that the narratory voice is not necessarily feminine even though the author of the work is a woman. See his "Virgina Woolf's Narrators and the Art of 'Life Itself,'" in *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity* ed. Ralph Freedman (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980), p. 35.

6"Syntagmatic and paradigmatic" are a pair of concepts first derived from structuralism. Wolfgang Iser, however, uses them to describe the phenomenology of reading in *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978). Specific discussion of these two terms in terms of reading can be found on pp. 212-19.


8Notice here I use "his authority" rather than "her authority." See also Note 5 of this paper.

9Regarding the semantic horizon and the connectibility of the text, refer to Iser's *The Act of Reading*, pp. 111-12; pp. 183-86; pp. 194-95; etc.
吳爾芙「去燈塔」中沉默的語言

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中文摘要

在「去燈塔」一書中，沉默是一種語言。讀者必須在沉默中聽到聲音，在空白中看到未書寫的文字。

作品中角色間相互的詮釋有時不經由聲音，而是透過一種姿勢和眼神。無聲的動作變成一種符號，透過符號，觀察者有時能直入意識的核心，有時卻導致誤讀。

讀者也介入這個角色間意識交互投射的世界。讀者必須瞭解任何一個角色的敘述都可能不可靠，敘述不是闡明一個真理，而是呈現一種觀點。當然讀者的詮釋也只是片面的，但任何提供片面見解的閱讀都是一種創作。

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