

SILENCE AND 'PHANTOM FULLNESS'

Kester Richardson

Annika J. Lindskog, *Silent Modernism: Soundscapes and the Unsayable in Richardson, Joyce and Woolf* (Lund: Lunds universitet, 2017), pp.378. ISBN 978-91-976935-7-8.

Anyone interested in sound studies or modernism will feel a hushed anticipation before opening *Silent Modernism: Soundscapes and the Unsayable in Richardson, Joyce and Woolf*, so used are we to associating the twentieth century with sound. In light of this critical bias, Annika J. Lindskog reminds us that there is a 'need for calm and stillness' (11). Silence, she tells us, is experienced before, between and after sound. This study presents a series of silences between Lindskog's sensitive interventions, 'reading the modernist novel in terms of what it does not say' (335). As with the silences in these modernist texts, after reading Lindskog, we are left satisfied by what she calls a 'phantom fullness' (340).

Lindskog does not seem to imply falsity or spectrality with this phrase, but rather an enigmatic depth of meaning, where texts speak a language of silence, as the writers demand that readers consider not only the words on the page, but also what is not explicitly stated. By reading silence as a presence that communicates in its own way, readers learn to consider the obscure elements in the modernist novel not as difficulties but as depth. This seemingly unverifiable attempt to describe what is unsaid in fact clarifies what we do all the time as critics, in reading between the lines and pausing over silences.

Lindskog's analysis centres on Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, James Joyce's *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*, and Virginia Woolf's novels, especially *Night and Day*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. The study is focused on the period 1900-1940, although the introductory discussion of the late-nineteenth century acknowledges the influence of Joseph Conrad and Henry

James. In her opening comments, Lindskog contrasts the newness of the modernist novel with the well-established, if 'disparate field' of silence in literature (18), from the familiar binaries between sound and speech, to the Beckettian silences that Ihab Hassan groups under 'anti-literature' (17). Lindskog adopts Hassan's words on absence, which 'strikes at the roots' of literature, inducing 'metaphorically, a great silence', so that the words on the page that remain are cries of 'outrage' and voices of 'apocalypse' (17).

Lindskog also makes a useful distinction early on between the 'function' or meaning of silence and its 'form' (19): its manifestation in style or lacunae, where a text 'chooses silence as its way of speaking' (23). She argues that silence is an overlooked aspect of modernist form, or another way of showing rather than telling (21). Further helpful terms include the separation between Lindskog's main interest in explicit, 'stated silences' (20) and the tendency of critics to restrict themselves to unstated, or 'absent speech acts' (21) as in Patricia Oudek Laurence's study of silence in Woolf. Lindskog situates herself with critics such as Angela Frattarola, Steven Connor, and Martin Jay in the recent 'aural turn' (338), where hearing is the main sense of the modernist text. Murray R. Schafer and Patricia Oudek Laurence, 'have argued that the ear is the *dominant* sense of the modernist text' (338, emphasis added). Before Lindskog turns to individual writers in detail, Chapter 1 situates silence in 'an early twentieth-century language crisis' (18), as the modernist novel arises from a crisis of literary realism, with silence being 'a central element of modernist obscurity'. Through 'suggestion and ambiguity' this aesthetic 'hints at that which it cannot represent directly' (70).

Lindskog quotes Miriam's striking assertion that 'The test of absolutely everything in life is the quality of the in-between silences'.¹ That declaration, she finds, echoes the forms of silence found in Joyce and Woolf. These writers are selected for their ability to reveal silences not as gaps and absences, but as 'silent presences'. In particular, such silences highlight 'the unsayable' (12), that is the 'ungraspable experiences' and states of mind that

¹ Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol.3. (London: Virago, 1979), p.389.

cannot be expressed in words, 'something behind and between the words that cannot be properly defined' (335).

In these cases, silence is more than just that which is not sound, as is the critical orthodoxy. In what is arguably Lindskog's most persuasive argument, revealing something readers of modernism might sense unconsciously, she describes the 'doubleness' (339) of the modernist text, where for Mrs Ramsey in *To The Lighthouse*, Stephen in *Portrait*, and Miriam in *Pilgrimage*, silence represents interiority, reflection and meditation, while sound stands for the outside world. However, while interior monologue is generally silent – in Joyce in particular there are 'inner-world sounds that occur in the mind only and that do not relate to anything heard in the outer world' (183) – this movement between inner and outer worlds reflects the changing focus of the modernist protagonist's consciousness, making the interplay between sound and silence an underappreciated element of 'modernist realism' (70).

It is reassuring to see Lindskog acknowledge how silence is associated with solipsism and alienation (337) for Stephen in *Portrait* and for Katherine in *Night and Day*, as silence is easily valorised as being unrepresentable, indefinable and thus somehow politically radical. Although there is no mention of his work, Lindskog's 'silent presences' unexpectedly echo Adorno, who dedicated *Aesthetic Theory* to Beckett's 'imagery of Nothing as Something'.² Another welcome twist in Lindskog's work considers silence through heightened visual perception, with Don Ihde deeming silence a 'visual category' (339), indicating the limits of the 'aural turn' in modernist studies. Here Lindskog subtly frames silence as the absence of *attention to* sound, rather than the absence of sound. One wonders how Lindskog understands other, more 'marginal' senses being sharpened or impaired by silence in modernism, most obviously smell, taste and touch, as well as less familiar categories such as kinaesthetic sense, which complicate the definition of sense and sound. This might move beyond the

²Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp.371-72. See also Jean-Michel Rabaté, 'Philosophizing with Beckett: Adorno and Badiou', in S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *A Companion to Samuel Beckett*, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp.97-118, (pp.104-5).

language of ‘doubleness,’ or the hierarchical opposition between aural and visual experience, as the study is most impressive when it complicates binaries like ‘sound and silence’.

The material on Richardson exemplifies these alternative dimensions of silence as a ‘formal device’ (175) – in its graphic form as spaces on the page, and as punctuation. For fans of Richardson’s comma, there is a compelling application of her theory of ‘creative collaboration’ (158), where commas invite the kind of pause, reflection and interiority Lindskog sees in all three writers. Unpunctuated sentences are aligned with experience and the external world, while punctuation, Lindskog suggests, creates stillness and silence. The interplay between pause and flow in the text has parallels in other similar contrasts: between eye and ear, stillness and movement, interiority and the external world, or, to use more Richardsonian terms, between ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ (167).

This interiority, in turn, constitutes Richardson’s version of silence as a ‘zone of being’ and ‘truth’ (133). Truth and being are partly related to silence through Richardson’s sympathy for Quakerism as:

Miriam’s moments of being [...] often have affinities with religious worship. [...] [T]here is not only a strong spiritual component to Miriam’s moments of silent attention but also a religious one, as she repeatedly returns to the notion of a divine presence inside her – reminiscent of the Friends’ idea of God that can be heard inside, through silence. (97)

The link between silence and spirituality leads Lindskog to conclude that ‘Miriam’s pilgrimage... has a destination’ of a religious nature (97). The various meanings condensed in each silence reflect an underappreciated technique of modernist compression, echoed in Lindskog’s concise style. Yet the ‘doubleness’ of silence also gives rise to the opposite modernist impulse in *Pilgrimage*, as Lindskog memorably observes, ‘the reason Richardson needed to write such a very long novel was because she had so much silence to put between the lines’ (175).