

Silence in Translation through Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*

Rissikatou MOUSTAPHA BABALOLA

Université d'Abomey-Calavi/BéninM

rissikatouba@gmail.com

Abstract

*This article explores the translation of silence in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* and its French translation *Entre les actes* by Yvonne Genova. Silence, as a complex stylistic and thematic element in Woolf's modernist prose, is conveyed through fragmentation, ellipses, and interruptions, challenging traditional translation practices. Through detailed comparative analysis of selected passages, the study examines how silence is preserved, adapted, or transformed across languages. It highlights the translator's delicate negotiation between fidelity to Woolf's poetics and the cultural and linguistic norms of French prose. The findings reveal that while some aspects of silence are domesticated for readability, the emotional and cognitive effects of silence remain sensitively rendered. This case study contributes to broader discussions on the translatability of silence and the creative role of the translator in mediating between source and target cultures.*

Keywords: literature, translation, silence, modernism, Virginia Woolf.

Résumé

*Cet article explore la traduction du silence dans *Between the Acts* de Virginia Woolf et sa version française *Entre les actes* par Yvonne Genova. Le silence, en tant qu'élément stylistique et thématique complexe dans la prose moderniste de Woolf, est exprimé par la fragmentation, les ellipses et les interruptions, ce qui remet en question les pratiques traditionnelles de traduction. À travers une analyse comparative détaillée de passages choisis, l'étude examine comment le silence est conservé, adapté ou transformé d'une langue à l'autre. Elle met en lumière la délicate négociation du traducteur entre fidélité à la poétique de Woolf et respect des normes culturelles et linguistiques de la prose française. Les résultats montrent que si certains aspects du silence sont domestiqués pour des raisons de lisibilité, les effets émotionnels et cognitifs du silence sont rendus avec sensibilité. Cette étude*

de cas contribue aux débats plus larges sur la traductibilité du silence et le rôle créatif du traducteur dans la médiation entre les cultures source et cible.
Mots-clés : littérature, traduction, silence, modernisme, Virginia Woolf.

Introduction

Silence in literature is far from a mere absence of words; it is a meaningful presence. It is a powerful narrative and stylistic device that conveys meaning beyond words which creates space for ambiguity, introspection, and emotional resonance. In the modernist tradition, few authors have explored the expressive potential of silence as profoundly as Virginia Woolf. Her final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), composed in the shadow of war and published posthumously, is replete with pauses, ellipses, and interruptions that give shape to silence in all its narrative complexity. These silences are not accidental gaps; they are deliberate and meaningful elements of Woolf's aesthetic, inviting the reader to engage with what remains unsaid.

Translating such a text raises important questions about the translatability of silence. How can one render into another language that which is deliberately left unsaid or ambiguously articulated? In the French translation, *Entre les actes*, produced by Yvonne Genova in 1944, the translator is confronted with the intricate task of preserving the rhythms, hesitations, and absences that define Woolf's style. This paper seeks to explore how silence, as both a textual and conceptual features, is treated in the translation process. Are these silences preserved, adapted, or lost in translation? What strategies does the translator employ to render them intelligible to a Francophone readership without undermining their subtlety?

The present study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on literary stylistics, narratology, and translation studies. By closely examining selected passages from both the source text and its French translation, this article aims to identify the textual markers of

silence and to analyse how they are transferred or transformed in the target language. Grounded in theories of literary translation, particularly those of scholars such as Antoine Berman and Lawrence Venuti, this research examines the aesthetic, ethical, and interpretive challenges involved in translating silence. These scholars' reflections on the role of the translator offer valuable tools for the analysis.

Ultimately, this study argues that translating silence is not only a linguistic challenge but also an interpretive and ethical endeavor. The choices made in translation inevitably reshape the reader's experience of the text and influence the reception of Woolf's work across linguistic and cultural boundaries. By focusing on silence as a central element of literary meaning, this study contributes to broader discussions on the limits of translatability and the role of the translator in preserving the poetics of modernist literature.

1. Translation of silence in literature

In literary studies, silence is not merely the absence of speech or sound, but rather a complex communicative tool that can signify myriad psychological states, power dynamics, and narrative functions. It operates as a form of language itself, one that communicates through absence rather than presence, through gaps rather than words. The literary critic Susan Sontag described silence as "a metaphor for a cleansed, non-interfering vision," whilst others have positioned it as a site of both meaning-making and meaning-disruption.

Feminist and queer literary theories have been particularly influential in reconceptualising silence. Rather than viewing silence solely as evidence of oppression or marginalisation, theorists like Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick have explored how silence can function as a subversive language for expressing that which heteronormative

or patriarchal discourse cannot accommodate. Feminist theorist Tillie Olsen's seminal work *Silences* (1978) distinguishes between silences imposed by external constraints and "silent" silences which are chosen as modes of expression, a distinction particularly relevant to Woolf's work.

The paradox of silence in literature lies in its dual potential: it can represent oppression, censorship, and trauma, but it can equally serve as a site of resistance, refuge, and eloquence. In modernist writing particularly, silence becomes a deliberate aesthetic strategy that challenges conventional narrative structure and disrupts expectations of linguistic transparency. For translators, this paradox creates a fundamental challenge: how does the translator render the one which is defined by its absence? How can the specific cultural, historical, and psychological dimensions of silence in one language be rendered meaningfully in another?

From this approach, Woolf's silences are not viewed as textual problems to be solved, but as significant communicative features that demand careful interpretive work from both translators and readers. The translation of silence thus becomes not merely a technical matter of preserving typographical markers or syntactic structures, but a deeply interpretive act that engages with questions of meaning, intention, and the limits of cross-cultural communication.

1.1. Silence in literature

Before examining specific instances of silence in Woolf's text and its French translation, it is essential to establish to understand silence as a literary device. Literary silence manifests in multiple forms, each carrying different implications for both author and translator. In the literary context, silence manifests in multiple forms: textual gaps, characters' refusals to speak, moments of contemplation, communicative failures, deliberate omissions, and even typographical spaces on the page.

Each form carries potential meaning, functioning as a site of significance rather than a void; which creates interpretive spaces that engage readers actively in meaning-making, requiring them to fill absences with their own understanding.

Typographically, silence often takes the form of ellipses, dashes, or other punctuation that visually represents hesitation, interruption, or trailing thoughts. Woolf employs these markers strategically, creating rhythmic pauses that mimic the natural cadence of thought or conversation. In dialogue, silence appears as pauses between speakers, unfinished sentences, or moments where characters explicitly ‘fall silent.’ These dialogic silences frequently reveal more about interpersonal dynamics than explicit exchanges, highlighting tensions, power relationships, or emotional states that remain unvoiced.

Critical perspectives on silence have evolved substantially, particularly in relation to modernist literature. Modernist writers like Woolf cultivated a poetics of silence that departed from Victorian verbosity, embracing brevity, suggestion, and the unspoken as responses to the perceived inadequacy of language after World War I. Theorists have identified this “literature of silence” as a defining feature of modernism, representing both aesthetic innovation and philosophical position.

Virginia Woolf's use of silence is particularly sophisticated and multifaceted. Throughout *Between the Acts*, she employs silence to explore psychological depth, render moments of revelation or ‘being’ (what she termed “moments of vision”), and examine the boundaries of language itself. In works like *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, both written by Woolf, silences often reveal more about characters than their speech does. Critics have specifically analysed Woolf's “aesthetics of silence”, noting how she transforms traditional narrative by incorporating spaces, pauses, and what remains unsaid.

In *Between the Acts* specifically, silence serves complex functions. It operates as a marker of isolation between characters, as a collective response to moments of beauty or terror, as structural intervals between sections of text, and as a metaphor for the threat of cultural extinction looming with World War II. The novel's very title suggests an interest in interstices; the silent spaces between periods of action, which take on heightened significance in a work written on the brink of global conflict.

1.2. Theoretical approaches to translating silence

Translating silence presents unique theoretical challenges that extend beyond ordinary linguistic transfer. While conventional translation concerns itself primarily with rendering words from one language to another, silence requires translators to navigate what is deliberately not expressed. This paradox—how to translate that which is intentionally absent—has attracted significant attention in translation studies, generating various theoretical frameworks and approaches.

A fundamental tension exists between notions of equivalence and adaptation when approaching silence in translation. Equivalence-focused approaches might attempt to reproduce the exact textual markers of silence (ellipses, dashes, paragraph breaks) in the target language, preserving the formal properties of the original. Adaptation-oriented approaches, by contrast, might consider how silence functions differently across cultures, potentially adjusting the target text to achieve similar effects rather than identical forms. This tension mirrors broader debates within translation studies about fidelity versus creativity.

Several prominent translation theorists have addressed aspects of translating silence or the unstated. Susan Bassnett's work on cultural translation emphasises that silence carries culturally specific connotations that may require thoughtful

mediation rather than direct transposition. Antoine Berman cautions against the ‘deforming tendencies’ in translation that might clarify ambiguities or fill in silences present in the source text, thereby flattening its poetic dimension. Lawrence Venuti’s concepts of ‘foreignisation’ versus ‘domestication’ offer another lens, raising questions about whether to preserve the foreignness of silence patterns or adjust them to target language expectations.

For a novel like *Between the Acts*, these theoretical considerations become particularly relevant. Woolf’s modernist aesthetics, rich in deliberate omissions and meaningful gaps, challenge translators to distinguish between silences that are stylistic conventions of English modernism and those that constitute the novel’s deeper thematic concerns. Furthermore, the cultural dimensions of silence such as English social reticence versus potentially different French communicative norms, create additional layers of complexity for the translator navigating between languages.

2. Silence in *Between the Acts*

Virginia Woolf employs a sophisticated array of textual strategies to inscribe silence within *Between the Acts*, creating a narrative landscape where what remains unsaid often carries as much significance as what is explicitly stated. Her approach to rendering silence is both technical and thematic, operating at the level of typography, syntax, dialogue, and narrative structure.

Typographically, Woolf makes extensive use of pauses and ellipses throughout the novel. These visual interruptions on the page signal moments of hesitation, contemplation, or communicative failure. For example, when characters struggle to articulate their thoughts or deliberately withhold complete expressions, Woolf frequently employs a series of dots or dashes to mark these gaps. Such typographical elements create a visual

rhythm on the page that mimics the irregular patterns of thought and speech, particularly in moments of uncertainty or emotional intensity.

Within dialogue, Woolf masterfully portrays the awkward silences that permeate social interactions at Pointz Hall. Conversations between family members and guests frequently trail off into uncomfortable silences, particularly when topics approach sensitive personal or political matters. The narrator often explicitly notes these silences: “There was a silence. They all looked at the view. The view was beautiful.” Such simple statements draw attention to moments when speech fails and shared contemplation or discomfort takes its place. These dialogue silences reveal the complex dynamics between characters and often speak to broader themes of disconnection and the inadequacy of language.

Perhaps most significantly, Woolf uses non-verbal moments to frame major narrative beats. Throughout the novel, critical events or revelations often occur in silence, with characters experiencing private epiphanies they cannot or will not articulate. The final scene of the novel exemplifies this approach, as Giles and Isa prepare to confront their marital tensions in a moment described as “the night before battle” but never shown directly to readers. This technique of narrative elision, that shows the moments before and after significant events while leaving the events themselves unstated, creates powerful zones of silence within the text.

3. Silence between acts: structural and thematic functions

The title *Between the Acts* directly references the structural silences that punctuate theatrical performances, and Woolf leverages this theatrical metaphor to create significant pauses throughout her narrative. These intervals through the spaces between the ‘acts’ of both the village pageant and everyday life

serve as crucial sites where meaning accumulates and resonates. Understanding how these structural silences function in the original text is essential for assessing their translation.

Most prominently, the novel includes literal intervals between sections of the village pageant. These moments when the stage is empty and the audience waits for the next performance become liminal spaces of collective reflection and private thought. During these intervals, the narrative often shifts to capture fragmentary conversations among audience members or their internal reactions to what they've witnessed. For instance, after the Victorian act of the pageant, Woolf writes: "While the chorus was singing, the audience had time to shift and cough. The actors were changing their dresses behind the bushes." This interlude allows for both physical movement and mental processing of the performance's meaning.

Beyond the pageant itself, Woolf constructs the entire novel around significant moments of transition and pause. Chapters often begin or end with silent contemplation, and the narrative frequently lingers in moments between conversation or action. These structural silences create a rhythm of contraction and expansion throughout the text, alternating between focused scenes of interaction and more diffuse moments of collective or individual reflection.

Thematically, these 'between' spaces carry profound significance. They suggest uncertainty and anticipation, particularly relevant to the novel's 1939 setting on the eve of World War II. The intervals become metaphors for historical transition, for the sense of waiting for catastrophe that characterised pre-war Britain. Additionally, these pauses often reveal the disconnection between characters' external performances and their internal realities which is a central concern of the novel. As La Trobe, the pageant director, reflects: "Swallows, cows, etc., are not symbols. The pageant is not a symbol. It's a travesty."

4. Translating structural silence

The translation of structural silence, made of pauses, breaks, and transitions that organise Woolf's narrative, presents distinct challenges that extend beyond word choice to encompass the architecture of the text itself. Examining how Yvonne Genova handles these structural elements in *Entre les Actes* reveals significant dimensions of the translation process.

Paragraph structure serves as one of the most visible markers of structural silence in Woolf's writing. Her deliberate use of short paragraphs creates visual breathing spaces on the page, while longer, dense paragraphs often convey moments of intense thought or action. In *Between the Acts*, this variation in paragraph length becomes particularly pronounced during the pageant scenes, where fragmented paragraphs mimic the disjointed experience of watching disconnected historical vignettes. The French translation largely preserves these paragraph divisions, maintaining a similar visual rhythm on the page. However, subtle adjustments occasionally appear, particularly where French syntactical conventions might make Woolf's extremely short paragraphs appear too abrupt.

Scene transitions represent another crucial form of structural silence. Woolf frequently shifts between locations or time periods without explicit markers, creating momentary disorientation that mirrors the characters' own sense of temporal dislocation. The French translation must navigate between preserving these deliberate discontinuities and providing sufficient clarity for readers. In several instances, Genova subtly reinforces transitional moments through tense adjustments or minor additions that make temporal shifts slightly more explicit than in the original; a choice that slightly modifies the experience of narrative silence but potentially enhances readability in French.

White space constitutes perhaps the most literal form of structural silence in the novel. Woolf occasionally employs extra spacing between sections to indicate significant shifts in perspective or the passage of time. The preservation of these visual silences depends not only on the translator but also on publishing decisions and typographical conventions.

Woolf's dialogue is characterised by a rich subtext of implications, incomplete thoughts, and trailing sentences that often communicate more through what remains unsaid than through explicit statement. This technique creates a complex challenge for translation, as rendering these subtle conversational silences requires deep sensitivity to both linguistic nuance and cultural context.

A distinctive feature of dialogue in *Between the Acts* is Woolf's frequent use of ellipses and dashes to indicate hesitation, interruption, or thoughts left deliberately unfinished. For example, when Isa speaks to William Dodge: "I was saying, we're not strangers—we've met before. In the garden of the Rectory, playing tennis. On a very hot Sunday." The dashes and fragmentary sentences convey her uncertainty and self-consciousness. The French translation generally preserves these typographical markers of hesitation, though French publishing conventions sometimes dictate slight adjustments in how ellipses are formatted or where dashes appear. These small changes can subtly alter the rhythm of hesitation in the dialogue.

Another significant aspect of Woolf's dialogue is her portrayal of English conversational reticence consisting in the cultural tendency to avoid direct expression of strong emotion or controversial topics. Throughout the novel, characters frequently talk around difficult subjects rather than addressing them directly. The Oliver family rarely confronts tensions explicitly, instead allowing silences to speak for their discomfort. This culturally specific form of communication presents a particular challenge for translation, as French

conversational norms may include different expectations regarding directness and emotional expression.

In her translation, Genova navigates these culturally encoded silences, deciding when to preserve the ambiguity of the original and when clarity might be needed for French readers. For instance, in exchanges between Giles and Isa, whose marital tension remains largely unspoken throughout the novel, the translation occasionally introduces subtle clarifications that make the underlying emotions slightly more accessible than in Woolf's deliberately opaque original. This represents a careful balancing act between fidelity to Woolf's technique of meaningful omission and consideration for the French reader's different cultural framework for interpreting conversational silence.

Woolf frequently depicts characters who cannot directly express their feelings, instead relying on silence and indirect communication. Translating these culturally specific forms of English reticence presents significant challenges.

5. Descriptive silence : nature and setting

Throughout *Between the Acts*, natural settings function as crucial sites of silence, offering reflective spaces where human noise temporarily recedes and other forms of communication emerge. Woolf's descriptions of gardens, fields, and the English countryside establish silence not as absence but as a different mode of presence, a distinctive atmosphere that must be carefully conveyed in translation.

The garden at Pointz Hall represents one of the novel's primary silent spaces. Woolf repeatedly describes it as removed from ordinary time and conversation, a place where characters can escape social performance. Her descriptions emphasise stillness and minimal sound: “The lawn was the stage; the terrace the auditorium; and the bushes and trees the scenery.”

This spatial metaphor establishes the garden as a theatrical space even before the actual pageant begins—a setting that exists between activity and repose. In translating these garden scenes, Genova faces the challenge of preserving their liminality, the sense that they exist in a suspended state between silence and expression.

Weather and atmospheric conditions frequently amplify the novel's silent moments. Woolf uses descriptions of air quality, light, and temperature to convey emotional atmospheres too subtle for direct articulation. For instance, after moments of tension, she might note: “The air over the corn field was dark blue. The air over the uplands was like a rock.” Such compressed, imagistic descriptions require careful translation to maintain their affective power without overexplanation. The French translation generally preserves Woolf's compressed style in these passages, avoiding the temptation to elaborate or clarify metaphors that deliberately hover between the literal and figurative.

Animal presence in silent landscapes creates another distinctive feature of Woolf's nature writing. Birds, cows, and insects populate the quiet scenes, their movements and sounds contrasting with human silence. In one notable passage, swallows flying overhead provide a counterpoint to human conversation: “The swallows were flying high—the swallows would be gone soon.” These non-human presences create a different register of communication within silence. The French translation preserves these animal references but occasionally adjusts their symbolic resonance to accommodate potential differences in cultural associations. For instance, certain birds might carry different literary or folkloric connotations in French tradition, requiring subtle recalibration to achieve equivalent effect.

Silence functions as a powerful tool for characterisation throughout *Between the Acts*, with each major character defined

in part by their relationship to silence; their comfort with it, their attempts to fill it, or their deliberate cultivation of it. How these character-specific silences translate into French reveals much about the cultural dimensions of non-verbal expression and the translator's understanding of Woolf's character psychology.

Mrs. Haines provides a particularly rich example for analysis. Throughout the novel, her silences carry distinctive weight and meaning. Unlike other characters who often chatter to dispel discomfort, Mrs. Haines employs strategic silence to exert social power. Woolf writes: "Mrs. Haines was aware of the silence, and of the emotion in the silence." This awareness signals her heightened sensitivity to unspoken social dynamics. In the French translation, Genova preserves these explicit references to Mrs. Haines's relationship with silence, but subtle variations emerge in how her silent moments are contextualised. French social codes regarding feminine reserve differ somewhat from English conventions, potentially altering how readers interpret Mrs. Haines's strategic silences.

The relationship between Giles and Isa Oliver, characterised by tension that remains largely unspoken throughout the novel, offers another significant case study. Their marital discord manifests primarily through silence rather than direct confrontation, with Woolf employing interior monologue to reveal thoughts they deliberately withhold from each other. This technique creates a dual reality: the polite surface of their interactions and the turbulent undercurrent of their unexpressed feelings. The French translation faces the challenge of maintaining this duality without allowing the tension to become either too explicit (which would undermine Woolf's technique of suggestion) or too obscure (which might lose French readers unfamiliar with the particular character of English marital reticence).

Miss La Trobe, the pageant director, has perhaps the most complex relationship to silence in the novel. As an artist,

she deliberately orchestrates moments of silence within her production, using them to provoke audience reflection. After one scene, she thinks: “She hadn’t meant that. Or had she? Anyhow, they were laughing.” This uncertainty about her own intentions reveals her struggle to control how silence communicates. The French translation preserves La Trobe’s artistic ambiguity but occasionally strengthens connective logic between her thoughts, slightly reducing the fragmentation that characterises her interior monologue in the original. This subtle shift reflects broader differences between English and French literary traditions regarding the representation of consciousness.

6. The translator’s approach

Understanding Yvonne Genova’s approach to translating *Between the Acts* provides crucial context for analysing how silence transfers between the English original and French version. Genova’s general translation approach appears to balance literalness with interpretative liberty. In passages where Woolf’s syntax is straightforward, Genova tends toward close correspondence, preserving sentence structure and imagery with minimal alteration. However, when confronting Woolf’s more experimental passages, stream of consciousness, fragmented dialogue, or deliberately ambiguous constructions, Genova demonstrates greater flexibility. This balanced approach seems particularly suited to *Between the Acts*, which alternates between conventional narrative and more experimental techniques.

Regarding silence specifically, evidence from the translation suggests that Genova recognised its thematic importance to the novel. She generally preserves Woolf’s explicit references to silence (“there was silence,” “she fell silent”) with direct French equivalents. For more subtle manifestations of silence such as ellipses, dashes, or trailing thoughts, Genova appears to have developed consistent

strategies that accommodate both Woolf's intentions and French stylistic conventions. For instance, she tends to maintain ellipses in similar positions to the original, though occasionally adjusting their frequency according to French punctuation norms.

Unfortunately, extensive paratextual materials about Genova's translation process, such as translator's notes, prefaces, or documented correspondence, appear limited or difficult to access from contemporary vantage points. This absence itself represents a kind of silence in the translation history, leaving modern readers to infer her methods primarily through textual comparison rather than explicit commentary.

7. Cultural and linguistic challenges

The translation of silence between English and French involves navigating significant cultural and linguistic differences that extend beyond simple vocabulary choices. These differences create particular challenges when rendering Woolf's nuanced use of silence, which often relies on specifically English cultural contexts and linguistic patterns.

At the cultural level, English and French attitudes toward conversational silence differ in subtle but important ways. English social interaction, particularly among the upper-middle class portrayed in *Between the Acts*, traditionally values a certain reticence and understatement. The ability to maintain comfortable silence or to communicate through indirect means is often considered a social virtue. French conversational culture, while certainly capable of subtlety and indirection, has historically placed greater value on articulateness and explicit expression. These differing cultural baselines mean that silence in social settings carries different connotations in each tradition, potentially altering how readers interpret characters' non-verbal interactions.

Linguistic structures present additional challenges. English, particularly in Woolf's modernist usage, readily accommodates fragmentation, sentence fragments, and abrupt transitions between thoughts, all techniques that create textual silence. French syntax traditionally favours more complete grammatical structures and clearer logical connections between clauses. While modern French literature certainly includes experimental forms, the linguistic conventions of the 1940s when Genova was translating would have created tension between fidelity to Woolf's fragmentation and adherence to French grammatical expectations. Genova's translation reveals consistent negotiation of this tension, occasionally introducing subtle connective elements to satisfy French syntactical norms while striving to preserve Woolf's deliberate discontinuities.

Literary conventions around interior monologue and psychological representation also differ between the traditions. English modernism, particularly in Woolf's hands, developed sophisticated techniques for representing consciousness through stream of thought, free indirect discourse, and abrupt perspective shifts. These techniques often rely on silence—on what remains unstated between thoughts—to create psychological depth. French literary tradition, while certainly rich in psychological exploration, had developed somewhat different conventions for representing interiority. Translating Woolf's psychological silences thus requires mapping her techniques onto French literary expectations without losing their distinctive character.

8. Comparative examples

Close comparison of parallel passages from the English original and French translation reveals the specific techniques Genova employed when confronting Woolf's textual silences. Two particularly revealing examples demonstrate different aspects of this translation challenge.

The first example comes from a scene where Isa Oliver observes the arrival of visitors to the pageant:

English Original	French Translation
Empty. Empty. Empty; silent; like a tomb. The room was a shell, singing of what was before time was; a vase stood in the heart of the house, alabaster, smooth, cold, holding the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence.	<i>Vide. Vide. Vide ; silencieux ; comme une tombe. La pièce était une coquille, chantant ce qui existait avant que le temps fût ; un vase se dressait au cœur de la maison, albâtre, lisse, froid, contenant l'essence immobile et distillée du vide, du silence.</i>

This passage demonstrates Woolf's use of repetition, semicolons, and metaphor to create a textual embodiment of silence. The analysis reveals several key translation choices: first, Genova preserves the repetition of 'Empty' (« *Vide* ») and maintains the original punctuation pattern with its sequence of semicolons. This rhythmic preservation is crucial, as the dissonant pattern of the original creates a sense of disconnection and emptiness. Second, Genova translates “singing of what was before time was” as « *chantant ce qui existait avant que le temps fût*, » employing the literary subjunctive (*fût*) to create a slightly more formal, poetic register than the original. This subtle elevation of register compensates for the impossibility of directly reproducing the strange temporal construction of Woolf's “before time was.” Finally, in rendering “the still, distilled essence of emptiness, silence,” Genova adds definite articles (« *l'essence immobile et distillée du vide, du silence* ») as required by French grammar, slightly concretising what remains more abstract in the original.

The second example comes from the opening scene. This scene is a rich example for examining how silence functions in Woolf's original text and how these functions are rendered in French translation. This initial exchange between members of the Oliver family establishes several patterns of silence that will

recur throughout the novel, making it particularly valuable for comparative analysis.

In the English original, the novel begins with a night-time conversation about a fish pond being dug on the property. After some initial dialogue, the narrative presents a significant moment of silence.

English Original	French Translation
<p>Then there was silence; and a cow coughed; and that led her to say how odd it was, as a child, she had never feared cows, only horses. But, then, as a small child in a perambulator, a great cart-horse had brushed within an inch of her face. Her family, she told the old man in the arm-chair, had lived near Liskeard for many centuries. There were the graves in the churchyard to prove it.</p>	<p><i>Puis ce fut le silence ; une vache toussa ; ce qui l'amena à dire comme c'était étrange, enfant, elle n'avait jamais eu peur des vaches, seulement des chevaux. Mais, alors qu'elle était toute petite dans sa voiture d'enfant, un grand cheval de trait l'avait frôlée à un pouce de son visage. Sa famille, dit-elle au vieillard dans son fauteuil, avait vécu près de Liskeard depuis des siècles. Il y avait les tombes dans le cimetière pour le prouver.</i></p>

This passage reveals several characteristic features of Woolf use of silence. The explicit marking of silence (“Then there was silence”) draws attention to the pause itself. This silence is not empty but filled with sensory perception (a cow coughing) that triggers a stream of memory and association. The silence thus functions as a pivot point in consciousness, allowing the narrative to move from present conversation to past recollection without explicit transition.

The French translation preserves the explicit marking of silence (« *Puis ce fut le silence* ») but subtle differences emerge in how the subsequent associations flow. The semicolons of the original are maintained, creating a similar rhythm of pause and connection. However, the French construction « *ce qui l'amena à dire* » (“which led her to say”) creates a slightly more logical connection between the cow's cough and Mrs. Haines's

subsequent remark than Woolf's more abrupt "and that led her to say."

This small difference illustrates a broader translation challenge: Woolf's original often allows thoughts to emerge with minimal logical connection, mimicking the sometimes random associations of consciousness, whereas French literary convention might favour slightly more explicit logical transitions. The translation thus negotiates between preserving the silence-marked thought patterns of the original and adhering to French stylistic expectations.

The third example comes from the novel's conclusion, where silence takes on particular significance.

English Original	French Translation
The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks. Then the curtain rose. They spoke.	La maison avait perdu son abri. C'était la nuit d'avant les routes, d'avant les maisons. C'était la nuit que les habitants des cavernes avaient guettée de quelque endroit élevé parmi les rochers. Alors le rideau se leva. Ils parlèrent.

This passage represents the novel's final movement from silence to speech. To render this passage into French, Genova firstly transforms "It was night before roads were made, or houses" into « *C'était la nuit d'avant les routes, d'avant les maisons,* » employing the repeated construction « *d'avant* » (before) instead of Woolf's more varied syntax. This repetition creates a more incantatory rhythm in French, emphasising the primordial quality of the moment. Secondly, the translation of "had watched" as « *avaient guettée* » introduces a connotation of vigilant waiting not fully present in the English "watched." This subtle shift intensifies the sense of anticipation before speech begins. Finally, the concluding sentences "Then the curtain rose. They spoke." are rendered almost identically in French: « *Alors le rideau se leva. Ils parlèrent.* » This direct

translation preserves the crucial brevity and finality of the original, maintaining the stark contrast between the preceding atmospheric description and the abrupt return to human communication.

These examples demonstrate Genova's nuanced approach to translating silence: preserving structural and rhythmic elements where possible, making subtle adjustments to accommodate linguistic differences, and occasionally intensifying or clarifying elements to compensate for what might otherwise be lost in translation.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of silence in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* and its French translation *Entre les Actes* reveals the profound complexity of translating literary absence. Silence in Woolf's final novel functions not merely as absence of sound but as a multidimensional narrative element with structural, psychological, and thematic significance. The translation of these silences presents distinctive challenges that extend beyond ordinary linguistic transfer to encompass cultural differences, literary conventions, and the fundamental limits of cross-cultural communication.

The analysis has demonstrated that silence manifests in Woolf's text through multiple textual strategies: typographical markers like ellipses and dashes, explicit narrative references to silence, structural pauses between scenes, unspoken thoughts in interior monologue, and moments of failed or withheld communication between characters. Each of these manifestations requires specific translation approaches, and Yvonne Genova's rendering shows remarkable sensitivity to these distinctions. While inevitably making compromises and adjustments necessitated by linguistic differences, Genova generally succeeds in preserving the multiple functions of

silence in the original text, particularly its structural rhythms and thematic significance.

The most significant challenges emerged not from direct linguistic differences but from cultural variations in how silence is perceived and valued. English social reticence, particularly among the upper-middle class depicted in the novel, carries connotations that differ from French communicative norms. Similarly, literary conventions for representing consciousness and non-verbal interaction varied between English and French traditions of the period. Genova's translation reveals a consistent negotiation between fidelity to Woolf's techniques and adaptation to French readerly expectations, generally finding effective middle paths that preserve the essence of silence in Woolf's final novel while making it accessible to a French audience.

Bibliography

- BASSNETT Susan, 2013. *Translation Studies*, Routledge.
- BEER Gillian, 1996. *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground*, Edinburgh University Press.
- BERMAN Antoine, 1984. *L'Épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*, Gallimard.
- BRIGGS Julia, 2006. *Reading Virginia Woolf*, Edinburgh University Press.
- BUTLER Judith P., 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge.
- HASSAN Ihab, 1967. *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, Alfred A. Knopf.
- HUSSEY Mark, 1986. *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction*, Ohio State University Press.

- KANE Leslie, 1984. *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- KOSOFSKY SEDGWICK Eve, 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- LEE Hermione, 1997. *Virginia Woolf*, Vintage.
- NAREMORE James, 1973. *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel*, Yale
- OLSEN Tillie, 1978. *Silences*, New York, Delacorte.
- ONDEK Laurence Patricia, 1991. *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, Stanford University Press.
- PELLERIN Elise, 2018. *La Traduction des Silences chez Virginia Woolf: Analyse Comparative des Traductions Françaises*, Presses Universitaires de Paris Nanterre.
- STEINER George, 1967. *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, Atheneum.
- SONTAG Susan, 1969. "The Aesthetics of Silence", *Styles of Radical Will*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- VENUTI Lawrence, 2008. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Routledge.
- WOOLF Virginia, 1941. *Between the Acts*, Hogarth Press.
- WOOLF Virginia, 1944. *Entre les Actes*, Translated by Yvonne Genova, Éditions Charlot.