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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE ART OF SILENCE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

KRISTINA GROB

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Everyone knows that writing the acknowledgments for one's dissertation is the hardest writing one will do for the doctoral degree. I could be cute and point my reader to the first chapter of this dissertation where I mention the silence that arises from the inability of language to convey the proper magnitude of a moral feeling, the moral feeling in this case being gratitude. Can a few words on this page really convey my appreciation for all the persons and offices that have made it possible for me to finish this project?

Absolutely not. Nevertheless, I shall offer a few words.

I must remember first of all my very long-suffering dissertation director, Mark Waymack, who has endured me, silence, and even talk of Henry James for these many years. Without his gentle prodding, professional nagging, and unwavering confidence in the interestingness of this project, it surely would have fallen into silence.

Jessica Horowitz, Associate Dean of the Graduate School, has been an excellent mentor these past five years. Indeed, the Graduate School in its entirety has been a source of constant support, and I am very grateful to the deans and staff of the Graduate School.

My gratitude extends to all the friends and acquaintances who have traveled this road with me in some fashion, especially Merritt Rehn-Debraal, Rebecca Robinson-West, Kelly Pinter, Hannah Kushnick, Helen Davies, Margie Justice, and Liz Ledman. Thank you. To all the members, past and present, of the English Department's madrigals group, thanks for enduring the melodramatic melancholy of a dissertating philosopher. For the

generous guidance and support offered by Hugh Miller, James Murphy, Jennifer Parks, David Posner, and Jacqueline Scott, a simple thank you is insufficient, but it is all I can do in this space.

My family has endured my absences and silences for the better part of a decade and I am grateful for the generous cushions of silence they permitted me during my graduate studies.

In the acknowledgments for her *Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland offers especial thanks to her spiritual director—something I had not noticed until I reached the epilogue of this dissertation. Maitland’s writing is so smooth, even when it seems most naked, that it could be easy to miss the challenges silence poses to her. I only tasted the smallest portion of the difficulty of silence and it was enough. Here I offer special thanks to my spiritual director, James Murphy, whose guidance has been inexpressibly necessary.

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CHAPTER ONE  
INTRODUCING SILENCE

And are we happy with all this tameness? Are you?  
—Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects*

There is something just a little disorienting about a text devoted to silence. What can one say about silence that will not destroy the subject? And there is something almost surprising about the vast literature about silence. The novice who wishes to explore silence without a plan or a map could easily find herself swallowed up by such a teeming sea. The past decade has seen a surge of popular research and writing on silence. There have been memoirs about silence, articles in popular magazines, and chapters in best-selling books about experiences with silent spaces.<sup>1</sup> There have been manifestos for silence and polemics against noise.<sup>2</sup> These writings are more and less casual, more and

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1. See, for example, Gordon Hempton and John Grossman, *One Square Inch of Silence: One Man's Quest to Preserve Quiet* (New York: Free Press, 2009); Melanie Hoffert, *Prairie Silence: A Memoir* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013); Anne LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise: The Transformative Power of Silence* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009); Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London, UK: Granta Books, 2008); "Be More Bored," *Whole Living* (October, 2008); Rachel Held Evans, "Silence—I am Woman, Hear Me No More," in *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Siting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband "Master"* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2012).

2. See, for example, Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* (New York: Random House, 2012); George M. Foy, *Zero Decibels: The Quest for Absolute Silence* (New York: Simon And Schuster, 2010); Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise* (New York: Public Affairs, 2010); George Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (New York: Random House, 2010); Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).



less careful. In academia, there is a longer history of multi-disciplinary treatments of silence that includes books and articles in such fields as education, communication, literary studies.<sup>3</sup> Theology and religious studies are so saturated with discussions of and appeals to silence that I think it might be possible to fill a dissertation-length manuscript with just an annotated bibliography thereupon. Philosophy, too, is represented in range of studies about silence, and it is to and for philosophers that I write.

### What Is Silence?

What is silence? What does it mean to be silent? Under “silent” in the Oxford English Dictionary the main definitions are as follows:

refraining from speech or utterance; taciturn, reticent, reserved; omitting mention of or reference to; passing over or disregarding; containing no account or record; marked by silence or absence of speech; characterized by the absence of sound or noise; quiet, noiseless, still.

The word “silence” is derived from the word “silent”; its main definitions follow: the abstaining or forbearing of speech or utterance (sometimes with reference to a particular matter); the state or condition when nothing is audible; absence of all sound or noise; complete quietness or stillness; omission of mention, remark, or notice in narration.<sup>4</sup>

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3. See for example, Robin Patric Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998); William Franke, “Varieties and Valences of Unsayability,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29 (2005): 489–97; Cheryl Glenn *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); George Kalamaras, *Reclaiming the Tacit Dimension* (SUNY Press, 1994); Dennis Kurzon, *Discourse of Silence* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Co, 1998); Karmen MacKendrick, *Immemorial Silence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); George P. Rice “The Right to Be Silent” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 47 (1961): 349-54; Roy Schwartzman, “The Mother of Sound: A Phenomenology of Silence in Wordsworth's Poetry” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association (Feb, 1987), 1; Michelle Boulous Walker *Philosophy and the Maternal Body: Reading Silence* (London: Routledge, 2001).

4. “Silent,” and “Silence,” OED online.

These definitions can be sorted into three main categories: There is first the silence of the forbearance of speech. This silence features prominently in the silence scholarship developed in fields like communication, education, and feminist thought, and it is taken up in one article about silence.<sup>5</sup> Second, there is a quality of silence that marks narrative gaps and omissions. This silence is commonly explored in literary art and in literary studies, and it appears in trauma studies, feminist thought, and linguistic studies. Lastly, there is the quietness that is called silence.

The last category, that of quietness, refers to the aspect or quality of silence that is not strictly tied to human communication. Silence as quietness gestures toward the realm of phenomena that can be measured. However, the silence of quietness is necessarily and recognizably relative. Compared to a train station, a library is silent. Compared to a library, a Trappist monastery is silent. Compared to a Trappist monastery, an anechoic room is silent. There are audible sounds in all of these places. It may be appropriate to say of these places that there is or is not a “mood” of silence that moves one to perceive the sounds present as of a piece with the silence she feels in that place. The sounds of pages turning, of feet moving bodies to places of prayer, or of one’s heartbeat may not be experienced as sounds that disrupt the atmosphere of silence. The silence of quietness might also then be considered as an inner state, one of inner stillness or peace.

If silence can be experienced in non-soundless spaces, then silence must not be defined strictly according to measurable aural data. Silence, or the experience of silence, is not a purely physical phenomenon, nor can it be measured empirically or objectively.

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5. Felix Adler, “The Moral Value of Silence,” *International Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 2 (1898).

Silence requires relationship, attention, and intention, and the same physical data will be interpreted by the same person as more or less silent accordingly. Thus, there will be no science of silence. Silence must be considered a kind of idea or a kind of experience that includes emotional, physical, and cognitive elements. This is, at this point, a provisional answer. In chapter two, I will revisit the question “What is silence?” In that chapter, I will look at some cross-cultural and historical writing to make a case for the development of the idea of silence.

### **Silence and Philosophy**

Where is philosophy in this discussion? Specifically, where is moral philosophy? With so many people seeking silence, and for so many purposes (and, indeed, on purpose), the time has certainly come for a response from moral philosophy. What good is silence? Why are so many people seeking it? Ought they, and ought we generally, to be seeking, preserving, and creating silence? If so, why, and if not, why not?

There are philosophical accounts of silence, and they tend not to follow the surges noted above. There were some early twentieth century philosophical books on silence such as Charles Courtenay’s *The Empire of Silence*, and Alice Borchard Greene’s *The Philosophy of Silence*.<sup>6</sup> These have not proved very helpful for my study. Many of the earlier studies of silence classified as philosophy are unhelpfully broad. For example, Greene offers a catalog of varieties of silence across historical, cultural, and religious traditions which, though interesting, offers no in-depth or sustained study of any of the

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6. Charles Courtenay, *The Empire of Silence* (Sturgis and Walton, 1916); Christopher Browne Garnett, *The World of Silence: A New Venture in Philosophy* (Greenwich Book Publishers, 1967); Alice Borchard Greene, *The Philosophy of Silence* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1940); Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Regnery: 1952 [first published 1948]).

expressions of silence mentioned. There is no demonstration or explication of the nature of the silence exemplified in the institutions she discusses, and there is nothing by way of argument for any meaning of those silences.

Max Picard's *The World of Silence* is acknowledged as the first philosophical attempt to explore the phenomenon of silence itself.<sup>7</sup> Picard begins his book by relating silence to the divine: he claims that all language derives from God so that silence is necessarily related to the divine.<sup>8</sup> For Picard, silence as metaphysics returns us to God and offers meta- or sub-discursive possibilities for understanding our world and about reality. Picard's book is a quasi-mystical, poetic-sounding, Catholic-inflected endorsement of silence and polemic against noise. He finds a secular successor in Stuart Sim's *Manifesto for Silence*.<sup>9</sup> These are loosely-organized accounts that skim a range of expressions of silence in order to plead for its preservation, bemoan its diminution, argue for its relevance, or simply show its many manifestations. None of these offers a sustained philosophical analysis of silence, let alone an ethical analysis.

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7. Robin Patric Clair identifies Charles Courtenay's 1916 book, *The Empire of Silence*, as an earlier inquiry into silence but concedes that Picard's book is the first Western philosophical assessment that finds silence to be a phenomenon that is co-originary with speech. Courtenay develops an extended discussion of the disciplinary aspect of silence—we now tend to call this silencing—and appears to treat silence as derivative of speech or as a therapeutic respite from excessive speech. See Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 25.

8. Picard, *The World of Silence*, 20.

9. Both Sim (see note 2, this chapter) and Picard lament the loss of silence in our modern world. Both exhort the reader to seek out silence, to fight against its demise. Sim, however, does not invoke religion or religious elements, and this distinguishes him from Picard. It is amusing to notice the same urgency and despair in their writings as Sim writes sixty years after Picard.

Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, André Malraux, and Martin Heidegger all offer brief discussions of some of the discursive and phenomenological aspects of silence in books primarily devoted to other topics—Levinas and Heidegger to Being; Merleau Ponty to perception; Malraux to the role of art in the post-war world.<sup>10</sup> In these books, silence is an aspect or example of the larger study at hand, not something studied for itself, and not significantly helpful for developing an ethics of silence. For a full-length treatment of silence, there is Bernard Dauenhauer’s book, *Silence, The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance*. In it, Dauenhauer draws together phenomenological and discursive studies, Picard’s *The World of Silence*, and Husserlian methodology to describe the experience and nature of silence. Dauenhauer’s focus is not an ethical one. His title, his methods, and his style make it quite clear that the goals of his study are to describe what silence is. To that end, he describes many species of silence and their functions as part of his overarching claims for a fundamental, nonderivative silence “which is at least equiprimordial with utterance.”<sup>11</sup>

In his catalog of species of silence, Dauenhauer makes some claims about moral and artistic discourses and their ties to silence that will help to situate my project and argument. There are two silences he attributes to moral discourse:

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10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 2001); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (NY: Routledge, 2004); Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1953); Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* trans. Peter D. Hertz (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982); Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Harper Perennial, 2008).

11. Bernard Dauenhauer, *Silence, the Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (University of Indiana Press, 1980), 5.

The relevant point here is that each of these two sorts of moral discourse is conjoined with a distinct sort of silence. The silence conjoined with science-resembling moral discourse involves a yielding of all references, or of as much reference as possible, to the particularizing features of the moral world. This yielding is oriented to opening the way for utterances having universality or at least maximal extension in their reference to men, the kind of conduct under man's control, and the appraisals of what transpires in the moral world. The silence conjoined with politics-resembling moral discourse, in the face of the particularizing features of the moral world, restrains the quest for universality or maximum extension. This restraint leaves room for utterances having maximal intension in their reference to the conduct subject to man's control and the appraisal of what transpires in the moral world.<sup>12</sup>

Moral silence, in Dauenhauer's description, is the "yielding of one's own particular appraisals of controlled human conduct to the court constituted by the appraisals which anyone can and should utter."<sup>13</sup> Practically speaking, and in plainer speech, it appears that moral silence resides in a reflective space wherein one judges one's own judgments according to the perspective of universality. My own personal judgments of events, situations, actions, and the like must yield, in Dauenhauer's language, to the judgment that ought to be made according to the consensus of an imagined eternal moral community. I will have a bit more to say about this yielding and reflective space below, when I introduce Felix Adler's article, "The Moral Value of Silence"; for now, I will simply state that this is not quite the silence I identify and explore in this dissertation.

What Dauenhauer has to say about artistic discourse is more fruitful for my project. Of artistic discourse he writes that it

is bound by the requirement to overcome the tendency which commonplace discourse threatens to induce. Far from being a merely gratuitous form of play, artistic discourse must overcome the referential values of routine discourse in order to allow new expressions of the meaning of reality to be articulated.

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12. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 42. Gendered language in the original.

13. *Ibid.*

The yielding at play here binds author and audience to one another in a unique way...their relationship is not mediated by what is already established as a definite and settled medium in which author and audience can meet. In the yielding which is intertwined with artistic utterance, both author and audience assume risks. The author risks being either unintelligible or not understood. The audience risks either wasting its resources or having its stable world shaken.<sup>14</sup>

The silences Dauenhauer calls artistic are the silences I am claiming for moral life in this dissertation. Put differently, I argue for the moral value of artistic silences here. The moral life I describe, and in which I aim to locate silence, is one characterized by the same risks Dauenhauer attributes to artistic expression: the risk of being unintelligible, and of being misunderstood; of pouring out one's resources and making oneself vulnerable, possibly to no end; and of having one's whole world shaken. The silences to which I refer, borrowed from fiction, poetry, and memoir, are themselves products of artistic discourse, the aim of which, in Dauenhauer's terms, is to "allow new expressions of the meaning of reality to be articulated." I will not only sustain an argument throughout this dissertation for the similarity between artistic work and moral work, I will also argue that these artistically expressed moral silences reveal something about the creative nature of moral life that is obscured by the prevailing treatise-style of philosophical writing. More will be said about this below in my methodology section where I explain my commitment to art in this dissertation. Much more, of course, will be said in later chapters.

For a treatment of silence from the perspective of moral philosophy, there is one article from the end of the nineteenth century. Felix Adler's 1898 article, "The Moral Value of Silence," is the only printed work I have found the primary theme of which is

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14. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 47.

the intersection of ethics and silence. Although Adler will not be a major figure in my dissertation, his article merits some discussion, if only to demonstrate the unfortunate brevity of explicit work in this area and to show how Dauenhauer silently picks up the major theme in Adler's article.

Adler notes several morally significant situations wherein silence is either an appropriate response or the proper condition for right action. These silences arise from the inability of language to convey different magnitudes of moral feeling. For example, Adler mentions the silences that inhere in expressions of gratitude.<sup>15</sup> He notes that the vocabulary we have for expressing thanks and gratitude is inadequate to our feelings and intentions: there are experiences for which and persons to whom we are deeply and overwhelmingly grateful and all the words at our disposal cannot ever feel sufficient. When you have cheered me when I was at the edge of despair, or when you have saved me from a disaster I did not anticipate, or when you have offered me unanticipated generosity, can the words "Thank you," or "I am so grateful" really convey the depth and fierceness of the real gratitude I feel? This is one of Adler's examples of a silence that has moral importance.

Next, Adler points to the silence that must surround acts of charity.<sup>16</sup> For charity (or other acts of love) to be truly charitable, it must be kept silent, as untouched by pride and boastfulness as possible. In this example, the silence does not arise from a problem with language or deficiency of vocabulary. Instead, Adler's point is that advertising

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15. Felix Adler, "The Moral Value of Silence," *International Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 2 (1898): 348.

16. Adler, "The Moral Value of Silence," 349.



charity undermines the ethical value of the act itself. Silence must necessarily accompany the activity in order for it to achieve the highest moral value. That charitable acts themselves ought to be done in silence does not entail that charity and other species of love cannot be discussed. It is of course necessary for us to investigate the nature of charity. We are also permitted to encourage and endorse it. However, our investigations and endorsements cannot be divorced from an acknowledgment of the silence that is a defining feature of charity.<sup>17</sup> A properly ethical inquiry into the nature of charity and other acts of giving love requires an acknowledgment of silence, and indeed requires an acknowledgment that silence makes charity morally worthy. In the example of charity, Adler points toward the possibility that there are certain kinds of moral actions, attitudes, and behaviors that require silence; I will suggest that it may be the case that there are some kinds of moral growth that require silence. Later chapters will devote significant attention to the moral silence that inhabits love.<sup>18</sup>

Third, Adler considers the silence of privacy. He claims for us “a right to be uncommunicative.”<sup>19</sup> This is a self-protective silence and is related to the development of

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17. Or perhaps I could change Adler’s “charity” into “charitableness,” “love,” or “loving-kindness” in order to make my point a bit clearer. In prevailing speech, “charity” has largely transformed from an abstract noun and the name of a virtue to a common noun as a kind of organization: *a* charity is a group that provides things for those who need them. One need not have the virtue of charity—one need not be marked by charitableness—to give to a charitable organization. Much “charitable” giving is indeed conspicuous, not at all transformed by silence.

18. Both of the novels under examination in chapter three, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Maytrees*, portray the silence of love. In chapter four, when I discuss the two memoirs, I will compare them according to the ability (and inability) for the two species of silence to convey love. Chapters five and six, in which I take up Iris Murdoch’s example of the mother-in-law, extends the conversation about the silence of love.

19. Adler, “The Moral Value of Silence,” 351.

integrity and, in his estimation, moral maturity. More will be said about silence and privacy in chapter two, where I shall trace a history of silence. In her book, *“A Moving Rhetoricke”*: *Gender and Silence in Early Modern England*, Christina Luckyj explains the silence of recusancy as well as the development of an idea of a right (in the modern sense of rights) to privacy for the emerging modern self. Moral maturation will become a major theme of my later chapters and I will argue at length for the necessity of silence to the development of the emotional states that help the merely self-controlled person move toward greater virtue.

What Adler calls his “principal thought” is his claim that “the highest moral value belongs to those ellipses, or intervals, during which is being revolved and matured in the mind the right utterance that is to come afterward.”<sup>20</sup> Whatever the moral value of all the things we could possibly say, Adler claims that the silence before the utterance is of still higher moral value. This is because “the morality of a person can be gauged by his reflectiveness, by the degree to which he has acquired the habit of seeing the invisible moral entities, and deriving thence his bearings.”<sup>21</sup> Adler’s claim finds modified expression in the silences Dauenhauer identifies as moral: the silence of yielding one’s own particular appraisal to that which one reasons is a universally endorsable appraisal. Earlier in my research, it seemed that this was certainly the silence I was investigating. I have come to reevaluate my research, however. The two kinds of silence around which my study is built are the silence that makes love morally beautiful and the silence of

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20. Adler, “The Moral Value of Silence,” 353.

21. *Ibid.*, 354.

moral transformation. The silence before speech is indeed a morally valuable silence and is one that will reappear frequently in these pages. The silence with which I am most concerned is a silence that obviates speech to convey or create ineffable, but nevertheless human, love.

The silence in the pause before speech can do and mean more than Adler notes (though this is not necessarily a criticism: one can only do so much in a fourteen-page article). The silence of restraint, it may seem, has all the philosophical importance of common sense and cannot merit exploration. But why are not the moments in which we draw on “common sense” part of our moral lives? Do not our moral personalities depend upon our grasp and deployment of common sense just as much as on principles and theory? The restraint Adler mentions expands into something much greater than mere common sense. Martha Nussbaum devotes an entire chapter to the moments in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* wherein the characters struggle with words and silence in order to say not just the right thing at just the right time, but to say those right things also *in just the right way*, with the right tone of voice, the right inflection.<sup>22</sup> By “right” is meant not just what is true, or what is just or what is the case. By “right” is also meant such things as these: How to say what will be said with the love in which it is meant? How to say things so that secrets that must be kept will be kept while also expressing truths that must be told? How to tell you what will pain you to know but what you must know in order that you might act in your best interests, and how to do so in such a way that I can spare you as much pain as possible, and how to do that without lying or turning away from

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22. Martha Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1990).

facing the enormity of the truth? A willingness to pause just before speech in order to think lovingly of others must indeed reveal much about our moral lives.

Adler's article touches upon several noteworthy aspects of the moral importance of silence. A short article does not offer sufficient space to treat any of them with the detail they deserve. I cannot exhaust the richness of moral silence even with the space offered by a dissertation. I can, however, contribute a substantial amount of writing to a deeper discussion of the place of silence in moral life, how to see it, and what is at stake for us, as philosophers, when we do or do not attend it.

### **A Note on Method**

In this dissertation I will offer a method for learning to notice silences. There may be many ways to learn; my method has grown out of the way I came to notice silence in my own life, academically and personally. Silence was not a part of life to which I paid much notice until I tried to read Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Nothing seemed to happen and I found myself baffled by the earliest pages. I found an article about the novel that helped me to train my attention. In the article, "In Pursuit of a "Woman's Sentence": Literary Initiatives of Virginia Woolf," Etela Farkašová argued that *To the Lighthouse* was a novel about silence.<sup>23</sup> I was intrigued. How could a novel be about silence? Was that not somehow a contradictory statement? My curiosity prevailed and I took up the novel again, this time looking for silence. I devoured the book and loved it. I have since read it many times, and each time I am amazed by the beauty and richness therein. Before I read the article, I did not know any method for attuning myself to the rhythm of such a

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23. Etela Farkašová, "In Pursuit of a "Woman's Sentence": Literary Initiatives of Virginia Woolf," *Human Affairs* 2 (2006): 104–115.

novel. Virginia Woolf does not write like Dickens or like Tolstoy or even like Henry James. I did not know how to read her and so my first attempts to read *To the Lighthouse* failed: my habits for paying attention to literary art were trained on significantly more representational artistic fiction and I did not then know how to look at literary art that is less representational and more abstract. I am yet no expert, but I have learned a few things. For me, looking for silence in the novel was a method for training my attention so I could learn to read a piece of modernist fiction. I did not expect that learning to read a kind of fiction outside of my experience and beyond my readerly comfort would teach me to see silence as something in its own right, and not simply as a tool for seeing something else.

Initially I looked for silence in the novel the way one looks for guideposts and signs on an unfamiliar path. Aha, there's another one: I am indeed on the trail I meant to be on. Eventually the guideposts became the thing I sought. The silences in *To the Lighthouse* are frequently what I consider moral silences. They are carefully crafted moral actions and responses created and preserved for the sake of love. They are only visible because the novel offers us omniscient narration that reveals the silences the characters create. The same silences, experienced in "real life" might go entirely unnoticed. This is a main point of this dissertation: art can reveal what lived perceiving must necessarily fail to see (or to see unambiguously and exhaustively).

My dissertation is structured to present silences very much like the way I learned to notice them. Chapter two will offer a kind of history of silence. In that chapter, I will establish an understanding of silence as an idea that encompasses more than empirical data. Though silence often accompanies and even depends upon certain kinds of

quietness or absences of speech, the silence I am discussing can take place within speech and in spite of it. My claims for the place and function of silence in moral life therefore depend on an understanding of silence as a kind of idea and a kind of attitude.

In chapter three, I will discuss literary art as an expression of moral silence. The majority of the chapter is devoted to two novels that can be said to be novels of silence. The first is Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. The second is Annie Dillard's *The Maytrees*. Much of this chapter reflects the beginning of my journey toward an appreciation of moral silence. Virginia Woolf was my first teacher and I offer a reading of the novel in order to be able to present what I learned so others can also learn to see silences, too. In this chapter, I will explore literary devices and the role of style in creating, expressing, and preserving silence.

Incidentally, the novelists and the poets I discuss in chapter three are all women. Patricia Laurence describes in her book *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* a specifically female literary tradition for writing silence in literary art. I am as yet unsure what to make of the overwhelmingly female authorship in my research. Since I have noticed it, it feels honest to acknowledge it. It may be that I have unknowingly limited my research and so created a silence in my method and in my argument. It may also be that there is something about silence that has tended to attract the attention of women artists and scholars; if that is the case then it must be noted here. For all these reasons, this statement about gender, female authorship, and method must be made, even if it will not make up a significant portion of or motivation in the project as a whole.

Chapter four continues the theme of female authorship, this time in the form of author-characters. I discuss two memoirs of silence in chapter four, Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence* and Anne LeClaire's *Listening Below the Noise*. Both Maitland and LeClaire are women, are novelists by trade, and are mothers of grown children. Both found themselves attracted to silence in middle life and each writes about her experiences relating to silence in memoir form. The memoir, in my project, represents a next step in learning to see silences. In chapter three, I relied upon omniscient narration to point toward silence. In chapter four, I invoke author-characters to tell us about the silences they create and the silences they find. We learn from real people what silence feels like and how it fits into an actual life. As readers, we can respond to authors of memoirs differently than we respond to fictional characters. We can, therefore, engage in different kinds of moral reasoning when we entertain a memoir than we could with a novel. Chapter four will offer examples of this.

In chapter four I also explicitly take up the problem posed by solitude: silence and solitude are closely linked and often one entails the other (though this need not be the case; there are many noisy ways of being alone and one can still one's mind and heart even while surrounded by turmoil). How can we tell whether the traits I claim for silence belong truly to silence and not to solitude or to some combination of silence and solitude?

In chapter five, having learned to notice silence first in fiction and poetry, then in memoir, I shift the exploration to that of moral growth and transformation while remaining oriented toward love in moral life. In chapter three, I explored the silence that inheres in the love between persons; in chapter five, I begin with questions about the love and the cultivation of the love of virtue. There is plenty of philosophical work that

endorses the cultivation of moral emotions; I argue that much of this work is silent about how this cultivation actually happens. As part of this argument, I evaluate Martha Nussbaum's chapters on Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* and show that her argument for character Maggie Verver's moral growth relies on silence she does not recognize.

Finally in chapter six, I show that there are examples of the silence of inner moral life already extant in philosophical writing. Iris Murdoch (yes, another woman) has an excellent example in her "On the Idea of Perfection," in which she describes a moral transformation over time that is invisible to everyone around her. I rely on Julia Annas's work on Aristotelian virtue to give more context for Murdoch's hypothetical example before turning to the dramatic moral transformation effected by an actual philosopher described in two memoir-essays. Alice Koller is a living philosopher who changed her whole life and whose transformation reveals much about the nature of silence and about the cultivation of emotion necessary for moral growth.

My use of literary art is necessary to the methodology of the project. I begin with literary art because it can be explicit about the things it keeps from saying, because it is creative and expressive and ambiguous, and because it requires emotional commitment and attachment. Literary art has the privilege of linguistic devices not permitted to most contemporary philosophers.<sup>24</sup> I mean several things by this: First, literary art may employ narrators who or narration that may be omniscient, or faulty, or characters themselves.

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24. Certainly one might think of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Beauvoir, all of whom develop post-Enlightenment philosophical ideas by making use of such literary devices. One might also note that there is a long history of philosophical writing in dialogue form. The dialogue has fallen out of favor, but for a very long time, philosophy also relied on fictionalization, limited and particular perspectives, and wit (to name a few examples) in order to introduce and explore genuinely philosophical ideas.



Second, it can reveal the unexpressed thoughts, feelings, and motivations of otherwise silent characters. This is crucial in the case of *To the Lighthouse*. Third, it is not tied to linear temporality. Although literary art must take place in time, it need not represent time as a series of consecutive moments. This will be important to my discussion of *The Maytrees*. These (and other) linguistic devices allow literary art to be explicit about the things it does not say.

Second, literary art is creative, expressive, and ambiguous. It will be central to my argument that the creativity inherent in art finds a parallel in moral life: moral life is creative. Although I will make use of many aspects of virtue theorizing in this dissertation, my project is opposed to that strain in contemporary virtue ethics that claims that moral life is substantially like proper functioning in plants and animals.<sup>25</sup> I would counter that moral maturity is as natural to human development as espalier is to the development of trees and shrubberies. Moral excellence, maturity, and goodness are the result of dedicated, creative, disciplined work. The aesthetic nature and appeal of espalier is not accidental in my comparison. Espalier is the careful cultivation and training of a “natural” tree into an “unnatural” shape that is beautiful and highly functional and productive. Similarly, moral growth and maturity changes the “shape” of our human lives. The difference between horticulture and moral life is that each person is both tree and gardener-artist. What I insist on here, and what often drops out of the conversation, is the creative aspect of moral life. The moral life is a creative life.

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25. See, for example, Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

As with anything else, we can forgo creativity. We do not, for example, have to dress ourselves with extreme attention and care, treating our bodies as a multi-dimensional surface on which we can drape wearable art. We have the option of dressing much like everyone else we see, wearing a kind of uniform that is perfectly functional. Most of us do not consider fitting into the prevailing sartorial average a creative and strong choice. We consider clothing “creative” when it deviates from what we have come to expect from most of the people around us. But so long as a person is covered and decent and looks mostly like other people, we consider that person to be acceptably dressed.<sup>26</sup>

Moral life is often treated in a similar fashion. So long as one is decent and acts mostly like other people, we consider that person to be acceptable, morally speaking. This, of course, leads to a very dull, boring view of moral life, and one that may be so thin as to be wrong. We forget the possibilities for creativity when we focus on minimums and on merely avoiding blameworthiness. As in sartorial choice, we also forget that we are not bound to the minimum. There can be, then, such a thing like a well-dressed moral character. The project of becoming a morally mature, well-developed, beautiful, functional, and productive person requires a level of creativity and a sense of taste. Literary art permits an exploration of the creative and artistic natures I claim for moral life, by which I mean that art provides a safe venue in which to question and hone

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26. And here, as is obvious, my example applies primarily to the very privileged global West/North, where fashion is very much an option available to a majority of people. The analogy certainly falls apart for the majority of the world.

one's taste. I will argue that moral silences depend for their creation and preservation on creativity and on artistic sensibilities.

Literary art, like all other art, requires acknowledgment of ambiguity. I wonder whether ambiguity is not the most distinctive feature of moral life. That is, we depend upon our ethical principles, judgment, and reasoning when we are unsure how to respond to something well, and in such a way that we do not cause harm to something or someone. This involves, in the form of imagination, the creativity mentioned above. It also requires an ability to be at home in discomfort, to accept the necessity of the lack of confirmation that one has done the absolute and only right thing. There are no moral report cards. With insufficient information and with imperfect reasoning, we attempt the best that we are capable of and then, rather than receiving a grade on our behavior, we are pushed into another test. Sometimes our behaviors are evaluated by others and sometimes we learn about them. Sometimes the unfolding of time reveals that we have done a good thing or that we could have done better. But ethics is necessary because we stumble about in half-darkness. Explicit preservation of the ambiguity of moral life is required for this moral investigation into the extreme ambiguity of silence.

Another way of expressing this same thought is to say that moral life requires skill and creativity in interpretation. There are many rules and principles, and there have been many treatises written about rules, the nature of rules, and the need for rules. Whether there are indeed any real rules governing moral life, it is still the case that understanding and applying the rules is thoroughly interpretive. In any case, moral life and our explorations of moral life require skill in evaluation, interpretation, application, and reflection.

Last, art requires emotional commitment and attachment for understanding. There have been many arguments for the importance of emotions to moral understanding.<sup>27</sup> In order to understand an artwork, it is necessary to commit to it, to take it into one's soul, to allow it to change the way one feels and thinks and wonders. This change is, I think, structurally similar to the change that we call moral growth. Art explicitly requires intentional and acknowledged attachment. For my project, I have committed to silence much like I have committed to the paintings I love most. I read silence like a poem, sitting with it even though I do not understand it, and reading it until some small thing becomes clearer. The ambiguity and creativity of silence repay morally an aesthetic commitment and approach.

### **Situating the Project**

My dissertation is admittedly a project that sits at the edges of the fields it claims. My claims for silence position me at the edges of feminist theorizing, the edges of ethics, and at the boundaries of literature and philosophy.

First, feminist theorizing. My project draws heavily on feminist methods and on my training in feminist ethical theory. I have examined the feminist scholarship on silence and found that there is little feminist argument for beneficial moral silences. Feminist work on silence overwhelmingly focuses on the negative, harmful, and malicious aspects of silence. There are excellent reasons for this: women have indeed

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27. The field of moral psychology and the wealth of scholarship on moral emotions is a bit too large for one footnote. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Susan Stark, "A Change of Heart: Moral Emotions, Transformation, and Moral Virtue" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2004): 31–50.

suffered the effects of oppressive silence and feminists (and anyone else) are right to point this out. There are plenty of feminist explorations of the dangers of silence and of the importance of preserving and strengthening one's voice. I hope that this can be a feminist, ethical exploration of beneficial silence.

Second, ethics. My project relies on a great deal of the language of virtue, much of which is current in strains of virtue ethics. This is not, or is not exactly, a virtue ethics dissertation. The language of virtue offers the best vocabulary for the moral nature of the silences I will discuss in the following pages, and I will draw on theories of virtue and on works in virtue ethics. I am not sure that silence fits neatly within a strictly or strong virtue theory. I am also not sure that that is a problem.

Normative claims in this project do not take the form described by Christine Korsgaard. She writes, "When I say that an action is right, I am saying that you ought to *do* it; when I say that something is good, I am recommending it as worthy of your choice."<sup>28</sup> I cannot bring myself to say that silence is *right*, though I can say of the silences I will describe in the following pages that they are not wrong. The strongest "rightness claim" I can make is that the silences are as right as any other morally commendable option. I cannot say that the silences are right because when I say of something "That was the right thing to do," I imply—if not flat out mean—that "That alone is the single right thing to do." This is not an implication with which I feel comfortable with regard to silence. I believe (and this is the point of the dissertation) that silence can be a morally worthy, morally commendable, morally admirable choice or

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28. Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 22.

behavior; that respecting silence can be the same. However, silence is not good in itself (just as it is not bad in itself, either). Silence can be morally commendable because of what it can do and what it can make possible. Silence can be a way of respecting privacy, of expressing love, or preserving one's own boundaries. In its negative expressions, silence can make persons, perspectives, and positions invisible; it can invoke a figurative or literal death. In neither case is silence itself good or bad. The purpose of this dissertation is not to claim for silence itself any status. It is to show that when people construct, preserve, and respect silences, this can be a morally commendable, morally worthy behavior. Thus, I could say, wholeheartedly, that respecting that which is respectable is right and that one ought to do it, and in recommending the cultivation of this kind of respect I can say, without reservation, that it is worthy of your choice.

I am not recommending silence to anyone. I am instead insisting that we learn to see the creation and preservation of some silences as a part of moral life. So I am not saying "You should practice or value silence." I am saying "You should learn to see that silence has morally commendable expressions." I am not saying that silence itself is right. I am saying that acknowledging the moral qualities of practices of silence is right, and that this is especially pressing for moral philosophers who are concerned with understanding, expressing, and teaching ethics.

It is simply the case that people create silences of all kinds. Some of us are naturally more silent than others. Some tend toward silences in particular ways or at specific times; others are more generally reserved or reticent. Some silences are made by the rejection or absence of words by, for example, not saying what one is expected to say, or by withholding a confidence, or by refusing to answer a question. Other silences are

more subtle and may be created by refusing to understand or acknowledge one's motivations in a given situation, or by sharing personal details but without being vulnerable and thereby making real intimacy difficult or impossible. These brief sketches of kinds of silence are simply part of what it means to be human and the purpose of this dissertation is simply to say what many of us already know to be true: these and many other kinds of silence inform and are informed by our moral commitments. The silences we create are among the moral choices we make and uphold. And since there is a great deal more moral conversation about negative silences, I restrict myself to ones I call positive or commendable because it is time to include those in our moral understandings.

Last, my dissertation sits also at the boundary of the area called philosophy and literature. I myself learn and love philosophy best when I read a great deal of literary art and I am a better reader of literary art when I commit to careful readings of philosophical texts. I require art in this dissertation as part of a method for learning to see silence. I also claim that literary art, unlike the philosophical treatise, can convey and preserve silences structurally similar to those we create and maintain in moral life.

### **What I am Not Doing**

Having offered an outline of what it is I will do, I will offer some explanation of what it is I will not or cannot do here in these pages (I will not leave the boundaries of my project wholly to silence). This is a secular investigation of the silences I claim for moral life. I have always intended for this to be a study that excludes as completely as possible all religious accounts and studies of silence. There are two reasons for this: First, there is so much writing on silence in religious experience and in theology that including religious silence posed a problem of time and size. Which religious silences would I

choose? On what grounds would I choose some and exclude others? A project that tried to meaningfully include all, most, or even many religious experiences, uses, and invocations of silence would be too big—the three hundred or so pages I have dedicated to argument could instead have been devoted to nothing more than an annotated bibliography if all religious silences were included.

Second, silence and religion have long (always?) been linked. There is plenty of scholarship available to the reader who seeks religious treatments of silence. What does not exist is an exploration that looks to find, on purpose, the limits of a secular study on silence. How far can one go into silence before one cannot avoid finding, acknowledging, or otherwise confronting the divine? Is it possible to seek silence apart from God? What does that search look like? Can an ethics of silence be offered to everyone, regardless of religious conviction, or is a meaningful ethics of silence available only to those who profess some kind of faith commitment? This exploration has not been done, and I wanted to make this question explicit.

I am also restricting my exploration to experiences of silence as a positive, beneficial, or otherwise good part of moral life by focusing on the silence that inheres in love and in creation. Love and creation (or creativity) are good things! The silences that make them possible are likewise good—they affirm and enrich life, they are themselves beautiful and they promote greater beauty. My study will not take up negative, harmful, life-denying silences for reasons similar to those for which I am avoiding religious silences: there are plenty of extant studies about the dangers of silence but very few about the joys of (secular) silence.



### **Looking Ahead**

Introductions are difficult. No less difficult are the conclusions to the introductions. In this chapter I have made several attempts at explaining the point of the project and I have offered an outline for the dissertation. At this point, I have done all I can do in an introduction and it is time to forge ahead and to clarify my argument as I develop it. To that end, the following chapter will take up issues surrounding the nature and meaning of silence: What is silence? What is it that silence can be or mean? How can we come to understand silence as having moral importance? These questions will motivate the second chapter, to which I now leave the kind reader.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A PARTICULAR, POSSIBLE HISTORY OF SILENCE

Odysseus, why do you sit there like a dumb person, eating your heart, without touching food or drink?

—*Odyssey* X: 416–17

#### **Purpose of This Chapter**

This is a chapter-long attempt to clarify what I mean when I talk about silence. In chapter one, I offered the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary; that definition is insufficient for a strong mutual understanding of what silence is and the way(s) in which I claim it to be a part of moral life. Difficulties arise because there remains no clear, succinct formulation for indicating silence, not even what I call moral silence. The impossibility of creating such a formula is necessary to the subject: if silence could be neatly and determinately delimited, it would not be silent; at best it would be a kind of unspoken determinate item or content.

Because silence is necessarily obscure, the best I can do is offer up a picture of some of the scholarship to show what it is I am not discussing before providing a particular and possible history of silence. The history will be provisional and incomplete. This is not a historiography of silence. Rather, I offer a history in order to show that silence is not immediately recognizable outside of particular socio-historical contexts. This helps to solidify an understanding of silence as something more than an empirically verifiable, objectively determinable phenomenon that can be grasped as quickly and as

certainly as can an attribute like redness or roundness to someone who can see. Attending to the development of ideas of silence helps to fix in our minds the layers of accreted meanings that we bring to current interpretations of persons, events, behaviors, and situations we may now call silent.

### **Classifying the Scholarship**

There are three main ways in which silence is discussed in the scholarship I have examined. First, silence can be located in some other practice, experience, or idea and examined from that perspective. Most of the books and articles about silence—across the disciplines—take up a particular aspect of silence or examine a particular problem that they claim is an example of silence. In *Silence: The Currency of Power*, the authors argue that by looking at the way silence works in music, language, race and economics, we can learn more about the origins and workings of power.<sup>1</sup> Silence, in this collection, is a means for getting at the hidden reality of power.<sup>2</sup> Robert Friedman, a journalist, writes about silence, too.<sup>3</sup> His book takes up silence in relation to contemporary media and our seeming incapacity to escape the relentless noise—verbal and visual—of pervasive media. Friedman uses silence as a foil against which to develop his polemic against the increasing invasiveness of the media. Neither of these books purport to study silence

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1. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb, *Silence: The Currency of Power* (Berghahn Books, 2005).

2. I wish to be clear that this is not a statement of censure—this is not a *bad* project, and for method, it may be quite good. In later chapters, I find silence by looking at absences, working back from effects to show that the evidence of silence points to its presence (though silently). This study does something parallel. The relevant difference is that silence itself is not the thing studied or sought.

3. Robert Friedman, *Noise Wars: Compulsory Media and our Loss of Autonomy* (New York: Algora Publishers, 2009).

itself, but instead rely upon the idea of silence to make a point about some other thing—power, media, freedom—that they otherwise have a difficult time examining.

The silence under examination in this first case can be real or imagined: the author of the compulsory media study is not locating some real silence in modern media; instead, he uses silence as a backdrop against which he can highlight the noisiness of a particular aspect of contemporary culture that is difficult to avoid. Alternately, George Prochnik, irritated by the noisiness of his life in the city of New York, spends most of his book, *In Pursuit of Silence*, seeking out ever noisier spaces to reflect on the meanings of sound, noise, and silence in American culture.<sup>4</sup> These are small, local silences that tend to express little about silence as a particular phenomenon, but use the idea of silence as a negative concept against which to evaluate other aspects of communication. These, therefore, will not be considered actual studies of silence except in a limited and qualified way.

The second category of silence talk might be specific to (or most prevalent in) literary writing. In the chapter “Macbeth Appalled,” Stanley Cavell posits silences of absence or omission in *Macbeth*; Woolf writes silence into *To the Lighthouse*; nineteenth-century women sonneteers wrote silence into their poetry.<sup>5</sup> These silences are “visible” because they are fixed in printed pages and they convey something positively real about

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4. George Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise* (New York: Doubleday, 2010).

5. Stanley Cavell, “Macbeth Appalled,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 232. For example, one such absence involves the “missing” Macbeth children: the Macbeths have no children in the play yet Lady Macbeth claims to have known the sweetness of nursing an infant. The apparent contradiction is never resolved in the play. I will discuss the silences of the lady sonneteers at the end of chapter two, and the silences in *To the Lighthouse* in chapter three.

silence as an experience or as a communicative possibility. The authors preserve (or others argue that they may have preserved) attitudes, experiences, or expressions of silence within and beneath the words they write. On the one hand, this makes the silence small and particular because, for example, the silence of a particular poem is the silence of just that poem. On the other hand, this small silence is not identical to the silence of the first category named above. It is small because it is particular and real, but this silence reaches beyond itself to gesture to something more general, some part of what it means to be human. The silence of a particular sonnet and the silence of a particular literary character are not the same kind of silence. Both silences, however, point to silence as constitutive of human communication, relationship, and experience. These are the existential silences that hold the absurdity of language within discourse; the poetic silences that hold volubility and ineffability in one hand; and the ethical silences that express love from a space between self-negation and self-aggrandizement.

The third category of writings about silence includes the expository treatises about silence. These writings attempt to describe and evaluate silence itself. The difference between categories two and three might be explained thus: Category two silence scholars find silence in some bit of writing or in some discursive situation and, in the process of thinking and writing about that particular silence, find that it is an example of a general idea of silence that is part of humanity. These writers find evidence for silence as a general constitutive element of human existence in their explorations of certain particular silences. Perhaps we could call category two writers inductive silence theorists. Category three silence writers begin with silence as a general part of humanity and attempt to describe it as such. These writers push to remain at the level of the

general, dipping to the realm of the particular when they require examples that elucidate the general idea to which they are attracted. We might call category three writers deductive theorists of silence.

The history I will present will remain solidly within category two, and for two reasons. First, the category three treatises tend to remain so general in their language that they appear to presume an Archimedean point from which to thoroughly exhaust all that can be meant by silence. The history of silence that will unfold below will show how silence developed from a small (relatively speaking) concrete (again, relatively speaking) phenomenon into a broad, abstract idea. My second reason for an inductively-oriented study is this: the treatises proceed ahistorically, neglecting the importance of particularity to an inquiry into silence. My study will favor studies and theories of silence that are grounded in particular experiences (even literary experiences), that remain sensitive to socio-historical context, and that nevertheless gesture beyond themselves to an idea of silence beneath, above, or otherwise outside them.

### **Ancient Greek Silence**

Silvia Montiglio uses both inductive and deductive methods in her evaluation of ancient and classical Greek silences. Inductive because she begins with a single culture at a specific period of time, and attends to a variety of manifestations of silence within that culture. Deductive because she brings to her study an acknowledgment of contemporary beliefs about silence as an idea and because she appeals to silence as a general concept and category of human experience about which general principles can be deduced. Montiglio's study is a useful point of departure for a history of silence because she appeals to the particularity and generality of silence and because she studies some of the

oldest examples of silence found in Western civilization (to which I am restricting my study for purposes of time, space, etc.).

In *Silence in the Land of Logos*, Montiglio examines the cultural context for ancient and classical Greek silence. Previous studies, she claims, projected contemporary beliefs about silence backward and interpreted ancient Greek silence as a subspecies of current beliefs about the meaning and value of silence. In her study, Montiglio argues for the importance of attunement to the particularity of cultural context for a thorough and accurate understanding of silence as a distinctly human phenomenon. Moreover, because of her attention to the particular character of ancient Greek silence, she claims that, unlike other studies in the field, she is in a position to offer an account of silence generally: “Scholars have occasionally paid attention to the meanings of silence within a single author, genre, or social practice (especially religious rituals), but here I hope to establish general principles through comparative readings of a variety of different texts.”<sup>6</sup>

Montiglio begins with a chapter about ritualized religious silence that sets up her subsequent chapters about the development of ancient Greek conceptions of silence as evidenced in what remains of ancient Greek epic and lyric poetry, drama, and oratory. This makes intuitive sense: the oldest, most literal words for silence are words that arise from religious contexts; these words help to make sense of the ways that other words came to generate and express increasingly abstract ideas about what silence is and what it does or can do. To this end, Montiglio begins with the words themselves, just as I did in my last chapter.

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6. Silvia Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

Montiglio notes that in Greek, as in Latin, there are two verbs that mean “I am silent,” *sigâô* and *siôpaô*. Unlike in Latin, the meanings for these two verbs overlap; although it has been posited that *sigâô* might be aligned with the Latin word *sileo* and mean a total absence of sound, and that *siôpaô* might be aligned with the Latin *taceo* to mean the negation of human speech, in Greek, the distinction is not always so clean. Montiglio is not keen to enforce a strict distinction, claiming instead that the overlap in meaning makes possible degrees of silence.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the absence of a clean distinction between the two verbs introduces an ambiguity to descriptions of silence in ancient Greek texts:

Therefore when a Greek writes *sigêi* or *sigâ*, we are not always able to decide whether he means “in total silence” or “in a low voice,” since these forms cover a wider semantic area than our “silence.” Where Homer speaks of a prayer uttered “in one’s heart,” we can be sure that takes place in silence, or that it is vocalized within oneself; but where he speaks of a prayer pronounced “in silence by yourselves, in order that the Trojans may not hear it,” a double reading is possible: either “in silence” or “in a low voice.” “By yourselves” only indicates that the prayer occurs in a private context, lest it be heard by the enemy.<sup>8</sup>

These words for silence and the ways they are used do not (yet) support a reading for the positive moral silence that I want to develop in this project. Moreover, although this ancient description of silence is (at this point in the discussion) religious, this does not align it with contemporary (or medieval or modern) attributions of mystical religious silence as a plenitude. The religious silences Montiglio describes are “the result of an interdiction. Both as a condition signifying the marginalization of the defiled and as a shield to protect the pronouncement of prayer from undesirable utterances, silence

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7. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 12–13.

8. *Ibid.*, 23.



conveys and yet controls a sense of uneasiness.”<sup>9</sup> There is nothing in this silence that indicates an excess of overwhelming ineffable contact with the divine. This kind of silence is important because the words for this silence and the context for their use help us to better understand the differences among silences conveyed by other words in the texts she examines.

#### The Silence of “The Dumb Person”: Silence in the Body

Montiglio makes a strong case for the cultural specificity of manifestations of silence in the first part of her second chapter. She begins with a discussion of Odysseus’s encounter with Circe in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Having successfully avoided being poisoned by the witch-goddess Circe, and having obtained her oath that she would not harm him if he became her lover, Odysseus is bathed and massaged by her nymph serving women before being presented with sumptuous food. Odysseus, however, sits without speaking or eating: “But no pleasure came; I huddled with my mind elsewhere, oppressed.”<sup>10</sup> Circe chides him for his behavior and Montiglio translates Circe’s rebuke thus: “Odysseus, why do you sit there like a dumb person, eating your heart, without touching food or drink?”<sup>11</sup> In the Fitzgerald translation, the image Montiglio insists upon is not quite as clear. He has “Why sit at table mute, Odysseus? Are you mistrustful of my bread and drink?”

Montiglio writes

from this passage we can draw a true morphology of Homeric silence insofar as the comparison of Odysseus with a dumb person implies that “the dumb one” is a codified image immediately recognizable to the audience, and that this image

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9. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 23.

10. Homer, *The Odyssey* X: 416–417. trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998).

11. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 48.

includes a series of attitudes complementary to verbal silence. In fact, the reference to the dumb person relies only on these attitudes, whereas verbal silence is not even mentioned in the preceding lines that describe Odysseus' behavior. Of course, Odysseus is silent; but Circe says that he resembles an *anaudos* only because he rejects food and remains seated. In other words, she labels speechlessness a silence that extends to the body.<sup>12</sup>

Odysseus's silence at Circe's table would not naturally signify to a modern audience the attitude or role of a person physically incapable of speech. It is easy for a modern reader to take Odysseus's muteness (to use Fitzgerald's word) as symbolic: the word "mute" has come to have a range of meanings and currently it is frequently used to describe one temporarily unable or unwilling to speak. Montiglio offers evidence that for the ancient Greek audiences, muteness meant literal muteness—the dumb one is one who cannot speak—and rejecting food is a form of speechlessness for a culture within which "to fast, within the code of hospitality, means to prolong a state of silence. A stranger who does not accept food remains a stranger; he does not become a guest."<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, Odysseus's posture while rejecting Circe's food is part of the codification of the image of the mute person. Montiglio lists the negative meanings attributed to sitting in silence: it can be a posture of impotence; it can be a sign of submission to someone else's power; in Hades, it is coded as feminine; in the Trojan war, sitting in silence is a posture suitable only for the lower classes and the multitudes—for those not permitted to speak in the *agorê*.<sup>14</sup> Embodying silence in these specific ways codes the silence so that attuned audiences will immediately understand. When the shared

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12. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 48.

13. *Ibid.*, 48.

14. *Ibid.*, 50–52.

cultural knowledge that grounds that understanding is lost or no longer obtains, then the silence that pervades a particular action, attitude, or posture may not be recognized as silence any longer, or the value of that silence may be lost to ambiguity or oblivion.

#### The Silence of the Achaean Army: Silencing the Self

The silences that Montiglio describes are easily compared with contemporary versions of similar experiences and descriptions of silence even while they are distinctly ancient and particularly Greek. Of the complex silence of the Achaean army in book four of the *Iliad*, for example, Montiglio reminds us that “those who abide by this discipline [of silent advancement toward the Trojans] are not the single heroes but the anonymous warriors that silently follow the voice of their commanders. Silence effaces the individual to construct an impersonal unity.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Iliad* 4, the truce between the Greek and Trojan armies breaks out into war at the goading of the gods. Hera convinces Zeus to permit Athena to persuade a foolish Trojan soldier to shoot an arrow at Menelaus. Menelaus suffers only a minor flesh wound, but the offense is sufficient to spur Agamemnon to action. He passes through the armies, praising here, goading there, and rouses them up to renew the fight against the Trojans. The silence to which Montiglio refers comes near the end of this book, when the Greek armies finally advance toward the Trojans:

Each captain ordered his men  
and the ranks moved on in silence...  
You'd never think so many troops could march  
holding their voices in their chests, all silence,  
fearing their chiefs who called out clear commands,  
and the burnished blazoned armor round their bodies flared,

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15. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 80.

the formations trampling on.<sup>16</sup>

There are two salient characteristics of the silence of the Achaean army in the *Iliad*. First, and Montiglio develops this point in greater detail earlier in the chapter, the anonymous silent warriors are not the heroes, but the lower class, workaday fighting men. In this context, silence is not a privilege, it is a marker of class and value. (This does not diminish the worth of the silence for the Greeks. The silence was crucial to the success of the attack upon the Trojan armies.) Montiglio's transition from silence in the *Iliad* to silence and the poetic voice helps to illustrate this: She tells us that the security of the hero's status depends upon poetic expression. Thus, the best hero is the one who cannot be forgotten because the poems are (or become) eternal. Even after death, the best hero never loses his or her particular voice.<sup>17</sup> The silence of the unnamed warriors symbolizes their status as intrinsically inferior and necessarily transient. In its silent obedience, the army becomes, at least in this moment, homogeneous, and its members are interchangeable.

The other noteworthy feature of the silence of the Greek army in *Iliad* book four is the way that silence dissolves the individuality of persons and turns a group of persons into a collective mass. This same feature has been noted by other later practitioners of silence. Certainly this has been the case for religious mystics, and I will not detail those experiences here. However, Sara Maitland, in her excellent memoir, *A Book of Silence*, also notes, from a perspective that includes both secular and religious experiences, the

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16. Homer, *Iliad* 4: 496–502, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

17. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 82–83.

ways in which silence both dissolves and distills the self.<sup>18</sup> The silence she seeks and about which she writes, unlike the silence of the Greek army, tends to be coupled with solitude, and this difference does, of course, matter.

The maintenance of the Greek silences is crucial to the success of the armies. According to the Homeric depiction of war, it makes sense to acknowledge that every fighter cannot style himself an Achilles, an Ajax, or an Odysseus or the effort would have failed. War tactics aside, a rudimentary theory of narrativity will not permit us to accord each fighter equal heroic or personal weight: a story depends for its sense upon a balance of characters of varying narrative importance. If every character is as much a hero as any other character in the story, then we lose all sense of *story*. Certainly, admiration for a particular story-scape or set of characters has led to the creation of derivative works that imagine the known story from the perspective of a minor character or that imagine the events and stories that take place after the end of the original work. My point is only that for any good story there must be minor characters and these minor characters are no less necessary to the movement of the plot than are the main characters. For narrative and for tactical reasons, then, the soldiers' individuality must be subsumed into the collective whole of the armies, and their silence may be a marker of their minor-character status. Nevertheless, this silence is not indicative of any moral failing or deficiency. On the contrary, to the extent that the soldiers work for the good of the whole and refuse to succumb to the diva-like desire for top billing in every scene, we might even say that there are times wherein participation in a self-obscuring group silence is morally worthy.

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18. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010 [2008]). Maitland's memoir will be one of the main texts under consideration in chapter four.

The Silence of the Poets: Silence in the Self

Earlier I claimed that literary silences are such that they can preserve small, local silences and gesture toward existential, phenomenological, metaphysical, and psychological silences external to the text itself and therefore be at once particular and general.

According to Montiglio's description, this is the case for Homer as a poet, and for Pindar as well. In the *Iliad*, Homer describes silences external to himself—the silence of the Greek army in book four, for example. He also writes silence into the narration of the poem and foregrounds the possibility of his own aphasia. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, Thetis begs Zeus to avenge her son Achilles by showing the Greeks just how much they need Achilles for their success. Zeus does not immediately respond to Thetis's prayer, and she clasps his legs as she renews her pleas. Finally, Zeus nods his head and gives his irrevocable consent.<sup>19</sup> Montiglio points out that “the *Iliad* begins by conjuring up its nonexistence.”<sup>20</sup> Had Zeus disregarded Thetis's supplication, there could have been no *Iliad*. The poem hinges upon a divine breaking of silence and arises from the silence that would have swallowed it.

It is not just the possible nonexistence of this specific poem that is given as a potential silence at the beginning of the epic.

For the Homeric bard fears the failure, let alone the definite loss of his sonorous art. Hence the utopian longing for an unbreakable voice, for multiplied mouths and tongues, which opens the Catalog of Ships in *Iliad* 2: “if I had ten tongues, ten mouths, an unbreakable voice, a heart of bronze...” (489–490). Over the bard hangs the danger of being forever silenced and of forgetting the art of the lyre.<sup>21</sup>

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19. Homer, *The Iliad* 1: 600–619, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

20. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 102.

21. *Ibid.*

Homer recounts such silences as the silence that precedes Zeus's answer to Thetis's prayer and the silence that homogenizes the Achaean army. He also composes with silence to gesture toward the silence that precedes and threatens any work of art. Not just the *Iliad*, but any artistic endeavor almost was not, as all are/were preceded by a silence that might have swallowed them except for some lucky affirmation that made them possible. The *Iliad*, as we can see, was indeed possible and made actual. Its actuality was always threatened and still faces the final threats of oblivion. The bard could have lost his voice and proved unable to repeat his song until the repetitions were secure. The writings could have been lost. In our current digital age and its cloud of virtual storage, it seems unlikely that any text could ever again be lost. But the sun will burn out in some seven billion years and it is possible that clouds of storage will not survive the stretching of our universe. The voice can still be lost.

### **Silence in Ancient Philosophy**

Montiglio's study has its limitations. Her translation and exegesis help us to see the importance of cultural context to an understanding of silence and her use of poetry and rhetoric helps us to see how silence grew from a specifically religious experience toward an increasingly abstract idea. Still, Montiglio's book does not exhaust ancient Greek silence; indeed, she is somewhat silent regarding philosophical silences. Aristotle and Plato turn up like grace notes, often in footnotes, throughout the text, and so are not absent from her study. Moreover, a section or chapter devoted to philosophical silences would have disrupted the arc of her thought: Montiglio begins with religious silence and proceeds first to the religious poetry of the Homeric epic, then to silence in poetry itself, then to oratory and speech, then to dramatic performance, then to dramatic tragedy, then

to death in dramatic tragedy, and finally to gender, secrecy, and deception. Each of the chapters builds on the ones previous and she makes a strong structural argument for the increasingly abstract deployment of silence in ancient Greek arts.

Since one of Montiglio's aims is to show how silence preserves, expresses, and conveys the power of *logos*, it makes sense for her to glide over ancient Greek philosophical engagements with silence. In *The Rise and Fall of Logos*, Raoul Mortley traces the development of themes of silence in ancient Greek thought in order to make a very different kind of argument. Mortley describes the development of suspicions about discourse that presage the negative theology in which Mortley is ultimately interested.

Mortley locates seeds of the suspicion about discourse and about the power of *logos* in Plato, citing severally from the *Phaedrus*, the *Theaetetus*, and the *Sophist*.<sup>22</sup> Plato does not focus his dialogues on the theme of silence itself; however, his reservations about writing, his references to ineffable dreams, and his discussion of the possibility of non-Being all gesture toward silence and deployments of silence, and they do so in ways that are not strictly religious or esoteric.

After Plato, silence increasingly becomes a subject and lens for study in its own right. Mortley writes:

The trend in late antiquity is to stress that the word itself, whether spoken, written or thought, may distract the mind from its goal of conceiving transcendent realities. As classical antiquity lumbers on to its middle age, one becomes aware of an enormous increase in the language of silence, which expresses itself quite clearly in a statistical increase in the occurrence of the word *sige* (silence).<sup>23</sup>

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22. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence* Vol. 1, *The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein Verlag GmbH, 1986), 110–111.

23. Mortley, *The Rise and Fall of Logos*, 110.



Mortley does acknowledge that the Presocratics did refer to silence—that some of the Greek words for silence do appear in their writings. However, he writes that these references do not support any argument or justification for a Presocratic “notion whereby the absence of language might be said to be intellectually helpful.” This helps support Mortley’s claim that the theme of silence is, generally speaking, a late Greek issue; because there is little to be found in the Presocratic writings on the theme of silence as intellectually interesting or rich in its own right, and because writing about silence increased after Plato, Mortley calls attention to an upward trend in discussions of silence, and to the increasing development of the idea of silence, a development that begins with or just before Plato and stretches to Philo.<sup>24</sup> Thus, one can trace a change in thinking about silence through time.

Mortley’s study and Montiglio’s study agree in many respects. They have different overall aims—Montiglio to show that silence reveals the power of *logos*;<sup>25</sup> Mortley to show that interest in silence developed in response to or as a result of growing suspicions about the limits of *logos*. Nevertheless, they agree that silence became an increasingly abstract idea over roughly the same period of time; regarding early Greek silences, they agree that they were generally not regarded as intellectually interesting as silences; and they share a concern for the contexts of silence: what counts as silence for the ancient Greeks changed over the course of ancient Greek history, so that early Greek silences look and function differently than silences in late antiquity. Just as there is no

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24. Mortley, *The Rise and Fall of Logos*, 110, 111, and 116.

25. I have used Montiglio’s book as a source for examples of ancient Greek silence and have therefore taken them out of the context of her overall project, which is to show that ancient Greek silence reveals the power of *logos*.

one “Greek” idea of silence, neither is there any one ahistorical, global idea of silence.

We inherit cultural and historical accretions of meaning and experience and must be careful to avoid attitudes toward the study of silence that do not acknowledge this.

### **Silence, Rhetoric, and Gender in Early Modern England**

Like Montiglio and her exploration of ancient Greek silence, Christina Luckyj, in her examination of early modern English silence, “eschews vague and potentially all-inclusive definitions to focus on what classical and early modern authors meant or thought they meant when they discussed or defined ‘silence.’”<sup>26</sup> Montiglio is not a source for Luckyj but their projects bear some resemblance to each other. Both take pains to show how what is called women’s silence—whether in ancient Greece or in early modern England—is misunderstood if it is not carefully examined: the name “silence” covers a variety of communicative, even discursive possibilities that, because they are not well recorded and because they were not officially sanctioned, have not counted as valid expression. Both are concerned with the problem of projecting current beliefs about and values for silence backward onto a past that did not hold such beliefs or recognize such values. Both distinguish the silence that motivates their projects from the mystical silences found in Eastern religious practices and both maintain a careful distance from Christian mystical experiences. In all these coincidences of method and style, both are good models for my current study.

Like I did in chapter one, Luckyj begins her book with the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions for silence. As I noted above, the definitions expand rapidly and

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26. Christina Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke’: Gender and Silence in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 2011), 1.

offer a variety of primary and secondary meanings. Luckyj attributes this to the English language's inheritance from Latin. She suggests that "the astonishing semantic elasticity of the English word "silence" as it glosses terms ranging from consent to secrecy, from impotence to shame, may thus be due in part to the diverse etymological origins of its Latin roots." Even though the English words derive from the Latin, the Romans borrowed concepts and imagery from ancient Greek, and only a few pages back I recounted Montiglio's claim that certain postures of silence in the ancient Greek context were coded as impotent and shameful. Impotence and shame may be some of the oldest associations with certain manifestations of silence. The specific behaviors that come to signify silent impotence and shame may vary across cultures and they may not be universally intelligible (or not intuitively) for this reason. But there may be a cross-cultural human tendency to classify certain attitudes and actions as a species of shame plus silence.

The history of silence Luckyj develops is also a history of the development of Roman-influenced English rhetoric. Classical Roman rhetoric and its assumptions about the power of rhetorical language provided ample material for the mounting debates about the responsibilities the individual bore in each of the increasingly separate communities in which he (and sometimes she) participated. As modern governments moved toward secularism and as modern individuals developed secular political loyalties in addition to their religious parochial loyalties, political actors relied upon classical rhetoric to persuade citizens to take on the new roles created within the various European Renaissance movements.<sup>27</sup> Classical Roman rhetoric, moreover, relied heavily upon

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27. Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke*, 13.

themes and thinkers imported from Greek oratory, politics, and philosophy.<sup>28</sup> English conceptions of silence, by relying upon Latin vocabulary and rhetoricians, include classical Rome's Greek inheritance.

#### Silence and Rhetoric

Luckyj traces the development of silence from its simplest, earliest invocations and descriptions toward its deployment as a rhetorical skill and strategy. Like Montiglio, Luckyj also pinpoints ancient Greek discursive practices as a progenitor of a deepening concept of silence. Whereas Luckyj refers the reader to an article about a 17th century poem and the iconography of silence it represents, Montiglio offers an entire chapter devoted to the silence of oratorical preterition that implied an abundance of evidence/information. Each of these three authors offers some crucial part of the story of the development of rhetorical silence and what this development means and can mean.

Montiglio's fourth chapter, "I will be Silent"; Figures of Speech and Representations of Speaking in Athenian Oratory," follows a chapter on poetic silence and precedes a chapter on tragic silence. Like the poets discussed in Montiglio's third chapter, the orators whose silence comes under scrutiny in her fourth chapter "feel urged to emphasize their intention to be silent, since they too are concerned with warding off the specter of 'silent impotence.'<sup>29</sup> Montiglio explains the ways in which Athenian orators reject actual or possible accusations of silent impotence by saying just enough about their silences to convey mastery over them and all they represent. Preterition—

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28. See, for example, Raymond B. Waddington, "Iconography of Silence and Chapman's Hercules," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 253.

29. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 116.

saying that one will not say something—appears to have been the most common rhetorical strategy for mastering silence and subject in Greek oratory, though Montiglio does discuss the use of aposiopesis (a trailing-off thought; literally, “becoming silent”) and the importance of preserving *euphêmia*.<sup>30</sup>

The most important feature of oratorical preterition for my project is its ability to magnify the unsaid. Here is Montiglio again: “by their silences, orators want to show that they are in control not only of themselves, but also of a rich material, the fertility of which they emphasize in a Pindaric fashion.”<sup>31</sup> The silence of preterition amplifies the content of the unsaid. This is a decidedly secular version of silence as plenitude, and is therefore a noteworthy moment in the development of the concept of silence. By naming a category of discursive possibility (what one could say but will pass over) and then leaving the contents of the category undetermined, the poet or the orator implies greater

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30. “For the term *euphêmia* encompasses both silence and speech: the utterance of well-omened words and the silencing of ill-omened ones. The semantic complexity of the term—silence aimed at speech, speech protected by silence—can be seen at work not only in its religious usage, but also in the context of the assembly, which began by the injunction of *euphêmia*.” Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 134.

31. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 140. Montiglio discusses Pindar’s poetry in chapter three. It is his praise poetry that sets up the discussion of oratory in the fourth chapter. About Pindar, she writes,

Thus, to inform the audience about one’s silence is not a true way of hiding, and the silence that declares one’s refusal to blame is the least silent blame. It is therefore worth asking why Pindar so often chooses to announce his will for silence, knowing that this announcement alone suggests the shameful detail that it claims to conceal. . . . The concept of a “black foil,” elaborated by Bundy nearly forty years ago, still seems to me the best tool to understand Pindar’s choice. Since the song is turning from myth to actuality, the allusion to Bellerophon’s death enhances the celebration that follows: against the *vaguely suggested* background of a tragic destiny there stands out the glory of the victor and . . . the pleasure that he feels is intensified by this contrast. Thus Pindar’s *interruption* brings out the brilliancy of the victor’s achievements by opposing them to a silenced misfortune (Montiglio, 111; italics mine).

knowledge than he might have had.<sup>32</sup> The speaker may only know one crime of which his subject may be accused; by pointing toward but not enumerating the crimes specifically, the audience may speculate about the insight or privileged knowledge held by the speaker. “Preterition is thus a mark of abundance. Announced silences do a better job than silent interruptions in serving the needs of a speaker who wishes to avert all suspicion of ‘silent impotence.’ For the statement ‘I will not speak,’ as a declaration of intent, highlights the orator’s mastery of his speaking, so that his silence could not be taken as a failure.”<sup>33</sup> For the ancient Greeks, the speaker that acknowledges the things of which he will not speak and sets them aside in an indeterminate fashion obviates accusations of ignorance and impotence and solidifies his authority. The plenitude of silence in Greek rhetoric will prove crucial to the development of the interiority of the individual in early modern England.<sup>34</sup>

In “The Iconography of Silence and Chapman’s Hercules,” Raymond Waddington writes about the development of symbols for silence. In his 1609 poem, “The Teares of Peace,” George Chapman personifies silence as “Herculean.” Silence and Hercules are not a common pairing and Waddington was curious about Chapman’s iconography. In order to understand the possible context for silence as Herculean, Waddington traced the ways in which early modern English (as a language) inherited and developed ideas about

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32. Since most orators and poets (though not all) were male, the pronoun seems accurate.

33. Montiglio, *Silence in the Land of Logos*, 140.

34. The silence of preterition is closely related to the silence implicated in Socratic irony interpreted as concealment: “Irony often insinuates that something is taking place inside you that your audience is not allowed to see, but it does not always entail that you see it yourself.” Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 67.

silence.<sup>35</sup> He found, as Luckyj did after him, that early modern English ideas about silence as eloquence and as strength depended upon classical Greek rhetoricians and philosophers.

Whereas Montiglio trains her focus on poetic, oratorical, and dramatic performances and texts, Waddington brings Greek philosophy to the reader's attention. Philosophers, no less than poets, orators, and dramatists, had a hand in shaping Greek invocations of silence. Pythagoras and Plato feature prominently. Pythagorean silence is easy to attend: Pythagoras required of his initiates at least two years of speechlessness. On the other hand, Platonic silence, at least in Waddington's understanding, is tied to the Socratic insistence upon the tethering of rhetoric to truth. The Pythagorean-Platonic religious dedication to philosophic truth figures significantly in the developing conception of silence, for Plato's opposition to the Sophists' divorce of truth from rhetoric and oratory first stimulates the demand that rhetoric be based on ethical considerations and popularizes the criterion that truth is the measure of genuine eloquence.<sup>36</sup>

Waddington considers ancient Greek philosophy, particularly Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy, a crucial moment in the secularization of silence and the subsequent moves to interpret silence as a type of eloquence:

The importance of Plato's frontal attack on Sophistic eloquence, however, lies precisely in the fact that it shifts the locus of silence from the quasi-religious intimation of philosophic truth to the directly rhetorical context of silence as a form of eloquence. The rhetoricians give some consideration to the technical use of silence—i.e. the effective use of pauses in delivery, conservation of voice,

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35. Waddington, "Iconography of Silence," 248.

36. *Ibid.*, 250.

situations calling for a laconic rather than a florid style—but it is only with the demand for a rhetoric grounded upon the truth that a conflation with the idea of silence as truth creates the offspring: silence is eloquence.<sup>37</sup>

Waddington helps to set the stage for Luckyj's book: "When the humanists of the Renaissance sought classical precedent for the eloquence of silence, significantly they looked for it in the rhetoricians."<sup>38</sup> The divide between the ancient Greece of Montiglio's study and the early modern England of Luckyj's study is bridged by Ciceronian rhetoric and the Platonic rhetorical tradition inherited by the poets and philosophers in the English Renaissance.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Luckyj relies upon Waddington to ground her claim that silence as eloquence can be traced back to Socrates through Plato.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Waddington offers a succinct account of the technological requirements for the increasingly abstract account of silence: "Despite the pejorative attitude towards writing which Plato here [in the *Phaedrus*] reveals, the conception of silence as eloquence would seem to be a manifestation of the gradual change from spoken eloquence of the orator to the soundless, graven persuasion of the writer as the western culture itself modulated from an oral to a written one."<sup>41</sup> What gets to count as silence changes during the shift from oral to written culture. When soundless words fill visible spaces, the absence of audible speech does not necessarily bring silence along with it. As reading becomes an increasingly "silent" activity, written communication acquired the

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37. Waddington, "Iconography of Silence," 252.

38. *Ibid.*, 253.

39. *Ibid.*, 253–54.

40. Luckyj, 'A Moving Rhetoricke,' 17.

41. Waddington, "Iconography of Silence," 255.



ability to protect new kinds of secrecy even as it challenged the notion that the absence of verbal speech is silent.

The plenitude of silence Luckyj found in early modern England had political significances unknown to the ancient Greeks Montiglio examines. For the Greek orator, the strategic silence of preterition leads the audience to believe that the orator has so mastered (and therefore knows) his subject and his feelings about it that he can pass over determinate content without articulating it. For the early modern subject, the silence of things unsaid became a political strategy, a marker of privilege and power, or a coded act of rebellion depending on who embodied the silence.

### **Recusancy**

During the religious conflicts that followed the establishment of the Church of England, recusancy became a locus of silence. Persons suspected of treasonous recusancy (that is, unlawful commitment to Catholicism) (and the distinction between religious heresy and political treason was not as sharply defined as we might currently think it) could be subjected to secret trials in which they were forced to take an *ex officio* oath before the trial began. This oath, used since the thirteenth century, required of

the accused at the outset of the inquiry that he should swear an oath to answer any questions that the court might subsequently put to him. A defendant who refused to take that oath could be imprisoned for contempt or subjected to other harsh sanctions. Because these defendants were typically guilty of the nonconformist religious practices for which they were being investigated, they resisted submitting to an *ex officio* oath procedure.<sup>42</sup>

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42. John H. Langbin, "The Historical Origins of the Privilege Against Self-Incrimination at Common Law," *Yale Law School Legal Scholarship Repository (Faculty Scholarship Series)*, Paper 550 (1994): 1073.

The accusations were not made known to the accused before the oath was administered. Having taken the oath, the accused was bound by religious honor to answer truthfully, was in danger of contempt of court if he or she remained silent, and was put in the position of incriminating him or herself if she spoke.<sup>43</sup> The oath had been protested since it first was devised, but by the middle of the sixteenth century resistance became more common.<sup>44</sup>

The use of the *ex officio* oath in early modern England offers a new insight into the nature of silence, an insight less visible in the ancient Greek usages just discussed. On the one hand, the silence surrounding the accusations recalls the amplifying silence of preterition employed by the Greek orators when they spoke against their political adversaries. Luckyj reminds her readers that “accusations must have been more terrifying for being unarticulated and vague”: by refusing to tell the accused anything about the crimes of which they were being investigated, the interrogators undoubtedly heard confessions to crimes they had not considered even before they forced the accused to confess to the crimes for which they were being secretly tried. Moreover, the interrogators enjoyed the privileges of silence because of the religious and political power they wielded.

“On the other hand, the recusants found a rival power in the silence with which they defied their interrogators—a silence which imitated not that of their accusers but the secret of the heart which they believed no crime.”<sup>45</sup> Denied the official privilege of

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43. Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke*, ' 34; Langbin, “The Historical Origins,” 1073.

44. Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke*, ' 33, 34.

45. *Ibid.*, 35–36.

silence, those accused of religious and religious-political crimes developed a new, hybrid kind of silence, one that rested on the “common law which defended a man’s right not to incriminate himself by being forced to speak,”<sup>46</sup> and also upon the burgeoning early modern idea of the interior self, a self not immediately available for public scrutiny and surveillance. The authority for the silence of the recusants did not rest upon external authority, as it did for the religious and political inquisitors who interrogated them. Instead, the recusants (and others like them) drew upon humanistic principles recovered and developed from both classical sources and early modern philosophies in order to insist upon the privacy of the individual mind.

#### Androgyny and Silence

As men began to practice silence, as in the case of recusancy, the relationship between silence and gender became much more complex. Luckyj challenges the assumptions that the silence attributed to early modern English women was unilaterally oppressive or controlling or that it is an obvious mark of women’s lack of agency. She argues instead that silence grew increasingly androgynous as the individual—whether male or female—grew in reflexivity.

Before showing how the meaning of women’s silence was not as simple as it might appear, she demonstrates the way political changes undermined the associations of masculine speech with freedom in the case of religious and political accusation, which I explained above. Silence, considered a special virtue of women, began to take on a masculine face. As men began to wield “feminine” silence, women’s speech and

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46. Ibid., 34.

women's silence took on new meanings. Luckyj writes, "if masculinity was no longer invested primarily in the agency and authority of *speech* (or the trope of silent, powerful deeds), inscrutable male silence revealed its affinities with traditional ideas of interior *female* space."<sup>47</sup> Even if the practice, "content," and deployment of women's silence had remained the same, men's silence entailed a revision of the meanings of women's silence: "Once silence has been endorsed as a strategic strength for both genders, it can no longer be held simply as a sign of submissive inferiority."<sup>48</sup>

Once men began to practice silence, silence became increasingly androgynous. For example, Luckyj introduces "English dramatist and miscellaneous writer," Robert Greene, and his fictional work, *Penelope's Web*.<sup>49</sup> In *Penelope's Web*, the heroine, Penelope, "paradoxically makes her 'discourse of silence' by delivering a long narrative tale about the virtue of silence to her women."<sup>50</sup> Nothing sounds terribly innovative or commendable about a man prescribing virtues for women by making a fictional female character his mouthpiece. What is noteworthy about Greene's *Penelope* is that the examples offered by the heroine are taken from Plutarch. "Greene thus appropriates an overly *masculine* trope of heroic prudence and resistance—with its recollection of Zeno's Stoic self-mutilation—to express the virtue of *feminine* silence. Far from signaling

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47. Luckyj, 'A Moving Rhetoricke,' 43.

48. Ibid., 52.

49. Ibid., 53.

50. Ibid.

submission to authority, this silence indicates (according to Caesar) ‘a profound wisdom, a sober and modest thing and full of deepe secrets.’”<sup>51</sup>

#### Early Modern Anti-Rhetoric and the Silence of Inscrutability

Early modern English humanistic silence blurred the binarism of masculine and feminine virtue and made possible increasingly androgynous conceptions of virtue to which men and women, according to their various capacities, could aspire. It would however, be false to say that all early modern movements, thinkers, and philosophies were motivated by these classically-inspired humanistic ideals. Thus, Luckyj also discusses the anti-rhetorical movements that helped to shape the development of the concept of silence in late fifteenth and early sixteenth century England.

#### **Ramism**

Peter Ramus, French Huguenot, logician, and pedagogue, developed an anti-Aristotelian, anti-Ciceronian position regarding not only the value, but also the scope of rhetoric. Terence Hawkes describes the effect of Ramus’s logical innovation succinctly. Ramus divided the traditional Aristotelian categories of rhetoric—invention, disposition, elocution, memory, and delivery—into two new categories. He moved invention, disposition, and memory to the new category of dialectic, thereby claiming them for logic, and left rhetoric with only elocution and delivery. “This effectively split logic from rhetoric, ‘reasoning’ from ‘speech,’ strengthening the former, and fatally weakening the

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51. Luckyj, ‘*A Moving Rhetoricke*,’ 54. I am fairly certain that Luckyj is quoting from Richard Braithwait’s *English Gentlewoman*, published in 1631. She gives the page number for the quotation as 222.

latter.”<sup>52</sup> Luckyj, following Walter Ong’s comprehensive study of Ramus and of Ramist contributions to rhetoric and pedagogy, adds to Hawkes’s explanation: “Whereas rhetoric was for Cicero, as for Aristotle, a large and exalted art indivisible from dialectic, for Ramus, rhetoric was ‘applique work’ quite inferior to the abstract silences of thought.”<sup>53</sup>

One of the legacies of Ramus’s revision of logic and rhetoric includes the diminished value of speech and a correspondent appreciation of the value of silence as contrary to “noisy” speech and conducive to “silent” conceptual thought:

In this economy where everything having to do with speech tends to be in one way or another metamorphosed in terms of structure and vision, the rhetorical approach to life—the way of Isocrates and Cicero and Quintilian and Erasmus, and of the Old and New Testaments—is sealed off into a cul-de-sac. The attitude toward speech has changed. Speech is no longer a medium in which the human mind and sensibility lives. It is resented, rather, as an accretion to thought, hereupon imagined as ranging noiseless concept or “ideas” in a silent field of mental spaces. Here the perfect rhetoric would be to have no rhetoric at all. Thought becomes a private, or even an antisocial enterprise.<sup>54</sup>

Luckyj relies upon Ong’s attention to the antisocial character of thought in Ramist rhetoric to point to what she calls the silence of “inscrutability.” As speech became devalued and as writing became the preferred medium for conveying the “noiseless concepts” of dialectic, the words one spoke came to express less and less about one’s person or about truth in any shape. It could no longer be assumed that the things one said represented the extent of one’s beliefs, attitudes, or thoughts. Instead, speech came to be seen as ephemeral and as of less consequence than printed words tied to a page and

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52. Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare’s Talking Animals: Language and Drama in Society* (London: Edward Arnold: 1973) 38–39.

53. Luckyj, ‘*A Moving Rhetoricke*,’ 27.

54. Walter J. Ong, SJ, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) 291.

grounded in dialectic. Truth in language must be fixed and words in air are not fixable.

Luckyj notes that this desire for fixity

led paradoxically to the inscrutable and indefinable silences of the closed and private self. Indeed, the practice of silent reading which had become widespread among educated laymen by the fifteenth century contributed to the formulation and dissemination of heterodox and subversive ideas which made civil war possible.<sup>55</sup>

The Ramist “distrust of dialogue” and devaluation of rhetoric contributed to the burgeoning concept of the private, inner self that is invisible and unavailable to others.

### **Calvinism and Puritanism**

“Unsurprisingly, Calvinists and Puritans were attracted by the ideas of Peter Ramus,” Luckyj writes.<sup>56</sup> Ong adds that, while the Calvinists and Puritans did not necessarily adopt Ramist “doctrinal positions,” nevertheless, they shared with Ramus an attitude of deep distrust toward rhetoric, indeed, toward dialogue and drama in particular. Of Ramist rhetoric, Ong writes “it is not a dialogue rhetoric at all, and Ramist dialectic has lost all sense of Socratic dialogue and even most sense of scholastic dispute. The Ramist arts of discourse are monologue arts.”<sup>57</sup> Ong notes a parallel distrust of dialogue in the Calvinists and Puritans and claims that they are “deeply distrustful of words, save perhaps in the homiletic monologue.”<sup>58</sup>

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55. Luckyj, *A Moving Rhetoricke*, 28.

56. *Ibid.*, 27. Note that Luckyj is talking about 16th century Calvinists and that I am not making any claims about the current state of the Reform tradition in Christian theology or its (possible) positions on silence.

57. Ong, *Ramus, Method and the Decay*, 287.

58. *Ibid.*

Luckyj notes a further reason for the Calvinist and Puritan distrust of language and of discourse in particular. For the both Calvinists and the Puritans, “the God-given blessing of speech has been so far abused by fallen men that silence is the only remedy.”<sup>59</sup> So long as the individual, private self speaks directly to God or directly about God, speech may be considered safe, or as safe as possible. However, given the total depravity of the human condition as a result of sin, as soon as these private individuals begin speaking to one another, speech comes under suspicion and is best avoided for the safety of silence. Luckyj quotes from William Perkins’s 1597 treatise, *Direction for the Government of the Tongue* to explain how a belief in total sinfulness promotes a preference for silence:

Because, in his view, ‘the heart of man by nature is a bottomlesse gulfe of iniquitie’ (2), the language which emerges from it is a filthy mixture of ‘*Swearing, blaspheming, Cursed speaking, Railing, Backbiting, Slandering, Chiding, Quarrelling, Contending, Jestng, Mocking, Flattering, Lying, dissembling, Vaine and Idle talking.*’<sup>60</sup>

Although the Ramists and the Calvinists and Puritans had different reasons for their suspicion of dialogue—for Ramus, dialogue was transformed into didactic monologue, and for the religious innovators, dialogue was potentially (or even generally) sinful—both developed similar and distinctively modern orientations to the world. Ong claims that Ramist rhetoric is oriented “toward an object world (associated with visual perception rather than toward a person world (associated with voice and auditory perception).”<sup>61</sup>

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59. Luckyj, ‘*A Moving Rhetoricke*,’ 26.

60. Ibid. Italics in original.

61. Ong, *Ramus, Method and the Decay*, 287.



This same attitude can be attributed to the Calvinists and Puritans, whose audiences for speech about God can “respond only as objects—that is, to say nothing back.”<sup>62</sup>

### **American Silence**

The United States, as a former English colony, can be expected to have inherited English understandings regarding silence. The words for silence in the English language express and expand, as Luckyj noted, the classic Latin meanings for silence, which, as I also noted above, inherited much from Greek oratory, poetry and philosophy. Moreover, the predominance of Puritans in some of the early colonial settlements is likely to have shaped American silence still further, loading it with suspicion of speech (or at least of flowery “rhetorical” speech) at the outset.

Zeese Papanikolas writes about the distinctive character of American silence which he offers as the “absent” ground for American art. America, in Papanikolas’s opinion, is haunted by its own lack of history and rootedness and Americans express their sense of this lack by exploiting the richness of the natural resources and then mourning the absences that bear witness to the pillage. These absences become the subject and medium and contribution of American art.

Papanikolas is certainly not the first or only to find that silence can be a subject of art. Amy Christine Billone, for example, writes about nineteenth-century British female sonneteers and shows how “silence intensified in women’s work.”<sup>63</sup> Billone finds grief to be one of the most prevalent themes in these sonnets of silence. For the female sonnet

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62. Ong, *Ramus, Method and the Decay*, 287.

63. Amy Christine Billone, *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007) 159.

revivalists in the nineteenth century, “grief is inextricably intertwined with silence. . . . Not only do these poets claim that the justification behind their grief is untellable; they also presume the communication of their sadness can never occur.”<sup>64</sup> The grief these poets write but cannot express recalls the silence of preterition practiced by the Greek orators: both the poets and the orators point to something that figures as an absence in their speech or writing. However, the orators are able say the things they refuse to say. The poets insist that they are not able to do so. Billone continues: “Women do not simply liken their grief to wordlessness; rather, they suggest that this anguish may itself rise from the impossibility of speech.”<sup>65</sup> Whereas the oratorical silence of preterition demonstrated mastery over self, subject, and language, the silence evoked by the sonneteers of whom Billone writes challenges the ability of language to express certain (indeed, any) emotional states.

Unlike British sonnets that express grief-laden silence, the American silence of which Papanikolas writes might be called the silence of American insubstantiality. *American Silence* is, at heart, a book of longing for the “lost” American West that never quite existed. Papanikolas’s book is a sort of dreamy story of American artists (writers, painters, singers, photographers, and one writer-geologist) whose lives and legacies almost intertwine. The common thread between all of them is a sense of rooted rootlessness, hollowness, and something approaching—and sometimes becoming—despair.

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64. Billone, *Little Songs*, 156.

65. *Ibid.*

Papanikolas writes that he heard “under the welter of the voices...and hidden inside the images” of such Americans as Ernest Hemingway, Henry Adams, Clarence King, Raymond Chandler, Hank Williams, Gertrude Stein, E. J. Bellocq, Jackson Pollock, and George Caleb Bingham

a kind of silence. The peculiarly heavy silence of something withheld, of something that was locked behind the omissions of the printed words, and that, in the paintings of Pollock and Bingham, was itself unpaintable.<sup>66</sup>

Having finally “heard” the silence that underlay these creative Americans, the author realized he had been hearing that silence for a long time in other places:

You had to listen very hard. Under the din of Cold War America, the moaning Hammond organs of the soap operas of the radio, the doom-laden news of the chattering ads, the silence was difficult to hear. Listening to the Grand Ole Opry with its cowboys who weren’t real cowboys, its hillbilly comedians who, you somehow imagined, weren’t real hillbillies, either, there was a sense of something deeper under the meretricious yodels and the cornball humor. What you heard when you listened for it was a kind of longing, a sense of something lost, lost perhaps even at the moment of gaining it, and possibly irretrievable. It was a silence as compelling as all of the myths of success you grew up with and believed, and perhaps was inseparable from them.

I’ve used the figure of silence for that palpable absence and sense of loss that invade the consciousness of the lives of the people I write of here.<sup>67</sup>

The silence of which Papanikolas writes is the silence of an absence, hole, lacuna, or gap. These absences, however, are not textual holes or discursive preterition. Papanikolas’s silence is the most abstract silence in this history of silence and is the product of all of the more “direct” silences previously discussed. Throughout the history I have been developing, silence has developed a progressively abstract character. The subversive silence of the recusants and the inscrutable silence of the private self in Luckyj’s study

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66. Zeese Papanikolas, *American Silence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 19.

67. Papanikolas, *American Silence*, 19.

are significantly more abstract than the oratorical silences Montiglio discussed. The ancient Greek silences of preterition still imply actual, learnable content even if that content is left unsaid. The early modern English silences, unlike the ancient Greek silences, help to define and expand what it means to be an individual with a private self. In Billone's study, silence, already a feature of the private self, challenges the ability of language to express emotions and experiences that the sonneteers suggested were inexpressible. In all of these cases, there is still some content to the something not said or unable to be said, however abstract the something and the means of not saying it is.

The distinctly American silence Papanikolas hears is, unlike the previous silences, the silence of something that is not "there." Perhaps it is fitting that Gertrude Stein is one of his figures: one could say as easily of the silence of which Papanikolas writes what Stein said of Oakland, "There is no there there."<sup>68</sup> The absence in this case does not point to the inability of language to express something that verbal expression seems to diminish (like the grief that rends the sonnets in Billone's study). Instead, this absence points to something that never was. Here is Papanikolas again:

The Greek word for that feeling of melancholy and loss [expressed in blues music] was *kaïmos*, and what I have heard might be called the American *kaïmos*. But it is a particularly rootless *kaïmos*, the *kaïmos* of white, not black, America, played off against a sense of history that is not tragic but optimistic, a melancholy that is not rooted in the deep past and the inevitability of suffering, but in some sense of a utopian possibility that we just missed, and of an unspoiled nature that was almost within living memory.<sup>69</sup>

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68. Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971 [1937]), 289.

69. Papanikolas, *American Silence*, 22.

If Papanikolas's book or my treatment of the same sounds a bit vacant or suspicious, it owes more, I think, to Papanikolas's writing than to my understanding of his project. Papanikolas's prose, at least in this book, is characterized by complex sentences filled with clusters of clauses. He ends his paragraphs with dramatic cliffhangers and reversals. He begins sections *in medias res* and then loops back to begin the tale from a beginning. (Ramus would certainly disapprove of the stylistic choices Papanikolas made.) Many of his sentences take on a lofty tone. When examined, however, they never seem to say as much as they promise. It is tempting to think that the vacuity of his prose is an implicit attempt at demonstrating the truth of his observations: there *must* be an absence that underlies the American experience—if it was not there, it would not show up in the project that claims it is there. I am not convinced that the vacuity is intentional even if it does mirror rather perfectly the argument he makes.

Whether or not Papanikolas intended to write a book that seems to convey in its style the underlying groundlessness for which it argues, the abstract silence of that groundlessness nevertheless deserves a place in this history of silence. Moreover, that same sense and fear of an underlying nothing—a nothing that is pure potential—has found philosophical expression elsewhere. In "Pyrrhus and Cineas," French existentialist Simone de Beauvoir describes a similar fear of groundlessness with regard to the self:

However long I look at myself in a mirror and tell myself my own history, I never grasp myself as a solid object. I feel within me that void that is myself; I feel that I *am* not. And that is why any cult of the self is truly impossible; I cannot destine myself to myself. Often in my youth I was in despair over not having any personality while certain classmates dazzled me with the brightness of their

originality. The other easily takes on that marvelous and inaccessible character because he alone experiences for himself the void in his heart.<sup>70</sup>

The existentialists are famous for having announced that existence precedes essence. This means that there may indeed be nothing “behind” or “underneath” our individual or collective existences. We simply are and the meaning, or essence, of our existence must be self-created through the development of projects that transform the pure potentiality of human existence into actual being.<sup>71</sup> *American Silence* could almost be an argument for the existential heart of American existence. Papanikolas writes

Every American was new-minted. Every American was alone. Perhaps that solitude is what creates the need for conquest that compels all the denizens of this book, that furious pursuit of what Adams’s contemporary William James called the Bitch Goddess Success. The other side of the shining quest, of the mountains that Clarence King climbed and named and of Hank Williams’s hits on the country music charts, was something blank and terrible and empty. The theme of failure that inevitably accompanies the dream of conquest runs through these lives like a dark thread.<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps the emptiness on the other side of success is another way of saying that the only ground for pursuing success is the pursuit of success. The success Papanikolas’s subjects sought was not “for” anything except itself. It was simply one way of having a project that could transform a potential self into an actual self. The recognition that there is no greater reason for success—or for community, or even for ethics—beyond the success, or community, or ethics themselves opens the human consciousness to a different view of the universe than that held by the ancient Greeks, the early moderns, or

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70. Simone de Beauvoir, “Pyrrhus and Cineas,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 116.

71. For more on this, see Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1976).

72. Papanikolas, *American Silence*, 20.

even most post-Enlightenment Europeans. The relative “newness” of America (to non-native peoples) inspired a hope of limitless potential and as this potential became transformed into an actual nation, the diminution of pure potential created the absence that Papanikolas explores. This absence is thus something that never was in an actual sense. The “utopian possibility that we just missed” that haunts Papanikolas’s study is the unactualized potential that characterized the nascent nation. There is nothing “there” to miss or to have missed. There is something of a memory of an idea of more possibility than had seemed possible and the realization that the dreams that possibility was made to bear have not and will not come true.

### **From Abstract Silence to Actual Ethics**

There are three features of silence drawn from the history I have traced that shape the next chapters of the present study. First, silence is an abstraction that has become separable from the experience of silence as a phenomenon. Second, silence is culturally particular, but also appears to be constitutive of human experience. Third, the experience and expression of silence is deeply tied to discourse and to art.

Because silence can be invoked even in spaces and situations where a great deal of noise is present, a study of silence need not necessarily limit itself to experiences of a lack of noise or sound. The dual nature of silence makes this project possible. This dissertation makes the case that silence can be a positive part of moral life and that it can be positive and moral in secular (that is, not only in religious) contexts. In the next chapter I will describe the interactions between the characters Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* as an example of a variety of the moral silence in which I am interested. The silence between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay is not

merely a silence of not speaking. It is not even quite like the silences of preterition because they do not say to each other that they could say something that they will not say (though both of them know that they are holding something back from the other that they could have said). Instead, they build their silences by talking about some things and not others, by intentionally leaving things unsaid and trusting that the other will somehow understand. Somehow, indeed, they do tend to understand each other and they are able to show love by talking around the topics that make them sensitive.

The silence between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay probably would not have been “visible” to the ancient Greeks. It could have been barely possible for the early moderns to have noticed—the silences Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay develop and maintain depend upon their inner, private selves and upon the marriage of both their public and private selves. Love, for Mrs. Ramsay, is more like the grief of which the nineteenth-century female sonneteers tried to write. Elizabeth Barrett’s sonnet “Grief” insists

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;  
That only men incredulous of despair,  
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air  
Beat upward to God’s throne in loud access  
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,  
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare...<sup>73</sup>

For Barrett, recourse to “shrieking and reproach,” or to language generally, is a sign that one has not descended to “full desertness.” Mrs. Ramsay, described as one who “could never say what she felt,” resisted saying to her husband the words “I love you.” She insisted on showing her genuine love for her husband in other ways: by caring for his

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73. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *The Complete Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, vol. 2 (1900; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1973) 230.



physical person and for the needs of their children; by creating a loving family home full of warmth and assurance and emotional security; and by understanding his worries and his frailties and by not reproaching him for being human and limited.

Mrs. Ramsay's creative love will be more fully explored in the following chapter. To understand the moral silence between the Ramsays, it was necessary to trace the development of the concept of silence from a more-literal beginning to an abstraction. Even the abstract notions of silence, however, will be particular and specific. To say that the ancient Greeks began with an understanding of silence that is more literal than, say, the American silence of which Papanikolas writes, is still to have missed what is important about Greek silence. The silence of preterition, for example, is not "silent" in one sense, as it depends on a lot of speech about something else. Montiglio spends a great deal of time describing the physical characteristics that signaled silence to the ancient Greeks to show that what was called silence in ancient Greek culture was a specific set of culturally acknowledged markers that defined and conveyed silence to those who were members of that culture. Although silence, as a practice, experience, or idea, appears to be a part of human understanding, at all levels of abstraction silence will be more and less visible/audible to others depending on the relationship the audience has to the community producing the silence. If a philosopher, for example, wants to learn to hear and see the silences in literary art, the philosopher will have to learn about silence in and through literary art.

All of the examples of silence that appear in and can be culled from the history I have presented depend upon discursive and even artistic expression. Not all of the silences are themselves artistic (literary, visual, or otherwise): Ong writes (humorously?)

that the “Ramists did not write metaphysical poetry, or, indeed, much poetry at all.”<sup>74</sup> The silences of the private self and of the recusant, nevertheless made their way into other forms of artistic representation. Luckyj points to the iconography developed in English emblem books. What follows is the explanation for one of the emblems George Wither offers in his *Collection of Emblems* (1635):

The clasped-Booke, doth warn thee, to retaine  
 Thy thoughts within the compass of thy breast;  
 And in a quiet silence to remaine,  
 Untill, thy minde may safely be exprest.  
 ...  
 For, whensoere Oppression groweth rife,  
 Obscurenesse, is more safe than Eminence;  
 Hee, that then keeps his Tongue, may keep his Life,  
 Till Times will better favour Innocence.<sup>75</sup>

This text accompanies an image, that of “a friar armed with a staff and a closed book” and Luckyj explains further:

Wither’s weary Stoic advice rejects not only the humanist doctrine of civilizing eloquence but also the notion of silence put forth half a century earlier by his predecessor Whitney. Whereas Whitney denounces ‘evell wordes’ which ‘pierce sharper then a sworde’, and advises eloquent silence or judicious speech as a means of enhancing social exchange, for Wither, silence is clearly a means of protecting the inward self from danger by making it unreadable.<sup>76</sup>

Even political and “non-rhetorical” silences can receive artistic treatment; all of them find discursive expression in some way. All of the discourse about silence relies upon rhetoric (in its pre- and post-Ramist forms) to help convey what language fails to directly express,

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74. Ong, *Ramus, Method and the Decay*, 286.

75. Luckyj, ‘*A Moving Rhetoricke*,’ 29. Wither was an English poet and Puritan pamphleteer.

76. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

which is to say that language about silence must necessarily talk around silence because silence itself reveals the limits of direct language.

Because language about silence must necessarily employ rhetorical “flourishes” where propositional language fails, I will turn to writing in which such touches flourish, namely literary art. In chapter three, I will discuss several silences from two novels, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Annie Dillard’s *The Maytrees*. Both novels use omniscient narration to reveal some of the characters’ silent thoughts so that the reader can see, as one cannot see outside of art, the things that are kept unsaid, and kept unsaid in a really silent way—if one holds back from verbally expressing some critical remark but rolls one’s eyes and snickers, silence is not maintained. The silences in the novels are generous, beautiful silences; they are silences of the kind I consider an admirable part of moral life. By pointing out these silences, and by calling them silences, I hope to give the reader better instruction in learning how to see silence. I will also argue that these silences, in their love and creativity, reveal love and creativity as part of the moral worth of silence when it is practiced and respected.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SILENCE AS LOVE AND SILENCE AS CREATION

Now in compassion they bore, between them, their solitudes each the size of the raveled globe.

—Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees*

In the previous chapter I offered an abridged history of silence, one of many possible histories of silence that could be written. I concluded the history by claiming that the history was necessary for showing first that silence has grown in abstraction over time, second that silence always depends for sense on historical and cultural context, and third, that art is important and possibly required to express silence and create with silence in a way that does not break it.

In this chapter, I will descend from abstraction and possibility and show what particular moral silences can look like. In this chapter, the moral silences will be taken from two different novels, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Annie Dillard's *The Maytrees*. I will offer brief summaries of the novels before explicating specific silences in both of them. I will identify the stylistic and structural elements of both novels that contribute to the production and preservation of the silences carried by the narration. Attention to patterns of structure and style will facilitate an introduction to ideas of discourse time and narrative time. As time becomes a more prominent feature of the argument in this chapter, I will compare musical elements like rhythm and pacing with

narratological concepts like duration and historicity to argue for the cooperation of silence and time in the act of moral creation. Along the way I will relate those silences to the taxonomies of silence offered by philosopher Bernard Dauenhauer and literary theorist Patricia Laurence in order to discover whether those taxonomies can capture and express what is morally interesting about the silences under consideration.

Let me say now that I will not have the time or space or structure to discuss or even acknowledge every relevant silence in either of these novels. Neither will I be able to acknowledge many other novels or poems or stories, here or elsewhere, that might also have been excellent candidates for discussion of moral silences. The only responsible way to convey the context for each of the silences I will consider would be to offer in an appendix the full text of the novels from which they are taken. Since that is both a violation of copyright and also an unacceptable method for dissertation-writing, I will desist. I can say that the scenes and characters discussed in the following pages are of sufficient importance to the sense of each of the novels taken as a whole, so that my discussion of them as novels of silence interprets them faithfully.

Patricia Ondek Laurence introduces her book, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition*, by describing three different kinds of silence Virginia Woolf wrote. After claiming that “it may also be said that Virginia Woolf is the first woman novelist in modernity to practice silence rather than speech,” Laurence outlines the three distinct silences: “Distinctions are made in her novels between what is left “unsaid,” something one might have felt but does not say; the “unspoken,” something not yet formulated or expressed in voiced words; and the “unsayable,” something not sayable

based on the taboos of Victorian propriety or something about life that is ineffable.”

Moreover, *To the Lighthouse* is said to offer all three of these types of silence.<sup>1</sup> Since silence is explicitly claimed for Woolf’s novel, let us begin there.

### ***To the Lighthouse: Silence as Love***

I confess I am not a Woolf scholar, and am not an expert on her work. I have read *To the Lighthouse* many times, and it was this novel that helped me to see my own interest in silence as part of moral life. My introduction will not be fancy and it will be faulty, but it should nevertheless help to orient my readers so that we can begin on something like a similar page while opening up the work for a discussion on moral silence and literary art.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part, “The Window,” takes place at some point before World War I on a summer evening at a summer home on the Isle of Skye in the Scottish Hebrides. On the day on which the novel opens, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, their eight children, and their friends interact in various ways before coming together for a dinner party at the close of the first section of the book. The narrated interior monologues blend together as the reader is moved across the island and through the house in a series of interactions that culminate in the dinner party. The first section of the novel ends after the dinner party, with the family’s preparations for bed. When the last member of the household falls asleep, the section ends.

The dramatic interest of this first section surrounds the lighthouse. In the opening lines of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay promises her youngest child, six-year-old James, that if it is fine the next morning, they may of course go to the lighthouse. The prospect of the

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1. Patricia Oudek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 1.

journey to the lighthouse fills James with great joy and he anticipates fiercely the fulfillment of the promise. Mr. Ramsay, noting the wind and checking the barometer, informs Mrs. Ramsay and James that the weather will in fact not be fine, that it will rain, and that the trip will have to be postponed. This is the central conflict in the first section of the novel. Mrs. Ramsay, who never said it would be fine, thinks her husband barbaric and cruel for failing to think of how his pronouncement on the weather would affect their son; Mr. Ramsay, a philosopher devoted to Truth, thinks his wife unjust for allowing their children to believe what is false. Nevertheless, the love between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay colors each scene and pulls the story along.

The second and central section of the novel, "Time Passes," tells what happens in between the evening ending the first section of the novel and the morning beginning the third section. In second section, the house is the main character. Ten years pass in this middle section of the novel, during which time the family does not return. In these intervening ten years, Mrs. Ramsay dies; the First World War begins and ends; and two of the Ramsay children die. The house stands empty and deserted of human presence except for when Mrs. McNab, the local woman hired to care for the house in the off season, comes by to fight her losing battle against the inevitable decay. The voice in this section is markedly different than that of the first section: because the main character in this section is a house and not a human, phenomena are presented differently; time passes differently. Time, we find, requires human presence and human mediation. We as readers only sense the passing of time when the rhythm of the house's movement and decay is punctuated by the intrusion of bracketed asides informing us of what happens to the

family in their absence and by the visits of Mrs. McNab. Silence requires human presence and human audience.<sup>2</sup>

The third section of the novel, “The Lighthouse,” takes place ten years after the dinner party that ended the first section. Many of the surviving members of that first party return to the island and the house for a post-war summer vacation. In the last sentence of part two, Lily Briscoe opened her eyes to find morning had returned to the house; the section ends with the word “Awake,” so that Part Two functions as a ten-year-long night. Mr. Ramsay and his two youngest children finally make the long-awaited and emotionally fraught journey to the lighthouse. Mrs. Ramsay died during the early part of Part Two, and her absence is felt in every part of the narration of Part Three. Lily Briscoe finishes the painting she began ten years previously. And then the novel ends. This ends my plot summary.

#### Style and Structure in *To the Lighthouse*

Time is a central theme of the novel and this is shown in several ways. First, the opening and closing sections of the novel—the bulk of the book—each depict (most of) a single day, whereas the middle section—the shortest section of the book—spans ten years. Time moves very slowly, then, during parts one and three and very quickly during part two.

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2. Bernard Dauenhauer, *Silence, The Phenomenon and its Ontological Significance* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1980), 24–25. Dauenhauer sets forth four fundamental characteristics of silence, two of which I indicate here: First, silence is a human performance (though Dauenhauer does note [?] that he is not making any claims about the possibilities for silence in non-human animals.) Second, silence cannot be “radically autonomous” and this is because of the uncertainty and risk that attend all performances of silence. “If the performance of silence were purely autonomous, then its author should be able to determine the impact it would have on him. But obviously he cannot do this.” Unfortunately for the reader, Dauenhauer never helps the reader to understand what he takes for “obvious”; my next chapter should help to show more clearly than Dauenhauer does what it means for it to be obvious that one cannot determine the effects of silence on or in one’s self.



When we consider what “happens” during the second part, it becomes clear that the novel is not a faithful account of the Ramsay family. It is not a historical drama; it is chronologically out of balance. In a different sort of novel, the weight would be precisely opposite what Woolf created: the central section would explore the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Ramsay’s death.<sup>3</sup> We would learn how the family reacts: How did Prue feel on her wedding day with her mother gone? Did Andrew think of his mother when he went for a soldier in the Great War? How did little James cope? Or Jasper, who was on the cusp of adolescence? We would learn about Prue’s courtship: Whom did she marry? Of what material and shape was her wedding dress? Did Cam behave during the wedding? Did Paul and Minta marry before or after Prue? And so forth. The later deaths of Prue and Andrew Ramsey would become significant moments in plot development. The parallel movements of Lily Briscoe, William Bankes, and Augustus Carmichael would offer the reader moments of relief from the unfolding story of the Ramsays as a family. But this is not what the novel does. Instead, the novel privileges the mundane moments that bookend the ten turbulent years the Ramsays endure. This (whatever it is) is the vision that both Lily and the narrator try to convey.

The opening and closing parts of the novel reflect in greater detail the same relationship to time, event, and plot described above. The discourse time in the first and third parts is long and the narrative time is short:<sup>4</sup> the narrative time is the time in which

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3. Of *The Maytrees* a nearly-identical judgment may be made; both novels pass over with relative silence the bulk of the “events” that a more traditional novel would make central.

4. I take the terms “discourse time” and “narrative time” from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* trans. Jane E Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

the narrative is completed and in the first and third sections, that span is just a day. The relative expansion of the discourse time is revealed in the lengthy moments that make up each day in the first and third parts. Just as in part two great swaths of the decade covered are glossed or omitted, in parts one and three, the omissions are at least as lengthy as what is given.<sup>5</sup>

Of the moments narrated, the reader is given more detail than can fit in the “real time” in which it might have occurred (the discussion of parenthetical and bracketed asides below will clarify this shortly). The amount of time between those narrated details is not easily determinable. The discourse time is so expansive and full and this can obscure the fact that the narrative time is just more than a sketch.

The discourse time, in turn, is meted out rhythmically, measured in repeated phrases, and chiasmic structures that pulse like the sweep of the lighthouse beam. Without a strong plot with which to lure the reader into the novel, some other means for orientation must be offered. Woolf offers the lighthouse beam in measured strokes to find her readers who are out at sea.

### **Punctuation and Narrative Time**

Much of the activity in the novel takes place outside the narrative flow. The bracketed asides in the second section function much like the parenthetical asides in the first section: they help to anchor the reader, often telling us the concrete activity in which

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5. It is strange to talk about a lengthy omission—how can something that is “not there” be said to have any extension at all? Since the entire dissertation takes for its topic that which is in several salient ways said to be “not there,” I will presume the reader can grapple with the thought. The novel rests heavily on the omissions and this is something we ought to expect from an artwork said to embody and express silence.

the character is engaged while she or he thinks the thoughts presented as the main (i.e., non-parenthetical) text. So while the flow of the text gives us a solitary Mrs. Ramsay reflecting on solitude, individuation, visibility and invisibility in the moments after James has been taken off to bed, there is a parenthetical aside telling us that “(she accomplished here something dexterous with her needles),” and later, “(she looked at that long steady light).”<sup>6</sup> These asides restore the narrative of thought to time, tying intangible musings of indefinite duration to specific, observable activities that can be located in time and space.

In the second part of the novel, the passing of time and the occurrence of particular events are also given as inserted asides that disrupt the flow of the narration.<sup>7</sup> Shortly after the family leaves the house, the reader learns in a bracketed aside that Mrs. Ramsay has died, suddenly, in the middle of the night, not long after the dinner that ended the first section. No other information is given. The reader never learns how, or how long after the dinner party her death occurred. Simply that it happened.<sup>8</sup> In similar asides, we learn that Prue Ramsay, the oldest daughter, has married, and that Andrew Ramsay, the oldest son, has gone for a soldier in the first World War. We learn later that

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6. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 63–64.

7. The ties to time are different in the middle part of the novel: parentheses have been replaced with brackets. This signals a stronger break or contrast between the narrative flow and the asides. In the first section, the parentheses mark a softer contrast than the brackets in the second section. While Mrs. Ramsay muses and reflects, the parentheses tell us what her hands are doing—in both the flow of the narrative and the parenthetical asides, Mrs. Ramsay is the actor. In the second section, the family has left the house. The reader stays in and about the house, hovering like a ghost, while the house remains empty of the family, who have returned to their non-holiday life on the mainland. The bracketed asides do not insert the house into time like the parenthetical asides inserted Mrs. Ramsay’s thought into time. The bracketed asides tell the reader what happens away from the house, back in England, even, while the house remains unoccupied.

8. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 128.

Prue died in childbirth and that Andrew died in the war. All these events are given in brackets, between sentences that otherwise appear to have little explicit connection to the story of the family. For example, “Flies wove a web in the sunny rooms; weeds that had grown close to the glass in the night tapped methodically at the window-pane.” Later, “Now and again some glass tinkled in the cupboard as if a giant voice had shrieked so loud in its agony that tumblers stood inside a cupboard vibrated too.” Worse, “Violets came and daffodils. But the stillness and the brightness of the day were as strange as the chaos and tumult of night, with the trees standing there, and the flowers standing there, looking before them, looking up, yet beholding nothing, eyeless, and so terrible.”<sup>9</sup>

In the near-absence of human activity, time—the experience of time, as well as the way time is portrayed, described, and conveyed—changes. Specifically, in this section there are changes from light to dark and back to light again, from storm to sun. Those changes, however, are not tightly tethered to such artificial and arbitrary markers as minutes or months. We know there is storm and we know there is sun, but the intervals between them are left unmeasured because there is no one in the house to measure them.

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9. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 132, 133, and 135. Connections can certainly be made between the events and the house or their placement within the telling of the experience of the house: after Prue marries, spring appears like a bride, bees and gnats veiling her eyes as rain falls and seems to bring with it knowledge of sorrow; just after the sorrowing rain, Prue dies. The paragraph about the “ominous sounds” from which the sentence about the tinkling glass was taken ends with “the thud of something falling,” immediately after which Andrew Ramsay is said to have in a shell explosion in France. We must indeed give Woolf credit for crafting this section with deliberation and mastery. My point is that the bracketed events do not take place because of anything the house has done—the house, in fact, is not itself an actor (even if it is a character). Furthermore, this section frustrates readerly desire for the privileging of the story of the Ramsays. Where the parenthetical asides in the first section might soothe the reader by offering physical detail to otherwise intangible, invisible thought, the bracketed asides in the second section disturb the reader, denying the reader knowledge or detail or significant narrative connection for a thorough story of the Ramsay family.

The house is left to the unseeing eyes of the “terrible” daffodils. The section is called “Time Passes,” but time is measured and is shown to have passed only in the bracketed interjections.<sup>10</sup>

### **Repetition In and Out of Narrative**

Woolf uses asides to relate time to the reader and she uses repetition to create rhythm. Repetition in *To the Lighthouse* comes in a variety of forms. For example, Mr. Ramsay repeats lines from the poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” “Some one had blundered” appears as narrated dialogue but also as a narrative introduction. Mr. Ramsay booms forth the lines of the poem which become part of the meaningless refrain lapping at the back of Mrs. Ramsay’s mind as she knits her stocking and minds her son. Then, as Mr. Ramsay quiets and she focuses her eyes on him, the narrator relies upon the cited line to lead Mr. Ramsay to his wife; she notices the line that had been pulsing behind her thoughts, attends the sense of the words, scans the face of her husband, and immediately arranges herself in an attitude of concern.<sup>11</sup>

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10. The way time appears and changes will become more important later in this chapter and then again in chapter four. One of the points I will make very shortly is that silence is a human phenomenon and does not exist (not in ways we can understand, at least) without humans to observe, practice, notice, or hold it. The other point I will make, in chapter four when discussing Sara Maitland’s memoir, is that silence changes the way we experience time. People who have subjected themselves to extended periods of silence and solitude tend to experience time in ways that are significantly similar to the presentation of time in Woolf’s novel. Maitland explicitly claims that silence resists narrative. This happens because of the way silence and time are connected. Narrative requires the presentation of development over time (even if the time presented is non-chronological). Since silence so stretches and condenses the experience of time that it feels unreliable and unpredictable, it follows that silence would make narration similarly unreliable at best and seemingly impossible at the extreme end.

11. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 30. Mr. Ramsay’s loud repetitions of the lines from “The Charge of the Light Brigade” became part of the pulsing background noise organizing Mrs. Ramsay’s thoughts. Suddenly she noted the words and “fixing her short-sighted eyes upon her husband, who was now bearing down on her, she gazed steadily until his closeness revealed to her (the

Repetition characterizes relationships, too. William Bankes, trying to explain his friendship with Mr. Ramsay to Lily Briscoe, remembers a scene from shortly before Mr. Ramsay's marriage. The two friends had been walking along a road when they came upon "a hen, straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks, upon which Ramsay, stopping, pointed his stick and said "Pretty—pretty," an odd illumination in to his heart."<sup>12</sup> This appears to Mr. Bankes as the picture and pinnacle of their friendship: the scene continues to endear Mr. Ramsay to Mr. Bankes even as Mr. Bankes cannot help but feel that their friendship stopped growing after that scene: "After that, what with one thing and another, the pulp had gone out of their friendship. Whose fault it was he could not say, only, after a time, repetition had taken the place of newness. It was to repeat that they met."<sup>13</sup>

Repetition also occurs in the form of repeated thoughts that pull the narrated drama. There are little chiasms that begin and end with the same line like little motifs shifting the melody, as in the paragraph that begins and ends "Never did anybody look so sad."<sup>14</sup> There is the repeated worry about the bill for the greenhouse roof (it might be as much as fifty pounds), around which Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts circle. Because she cannot

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jingle mated itself in her head) that something had happened, some one had blundered. But she could not for the life of her think what."

12. *Ibid.*, 21.

13. *Ibid.*

14. "Never did anybody look so sad. Bitter and black, half-way down, in the darkness, in the shaft which ran from the sunlight to the depths, perhaps a tear formed; a tear fell; the waters swayed this way and that, received it, and were at rest. Never did anybody look so sad." *Ibid.*, 28. See also the chiasmic passage on page 30 when Mr. Ramsay feels himself to be every inch the doomed Lord Cardigan at the Battle of Balaclava.

bring herself to tell her husband, she drops the thought only to pick it up again. These repetitions in narration have a lyrical effect, like a refrain in a song or a repeated line in a poem or again like a snatch of a melody that returns.

The rhythmic elements of Woolf's writing have not escaped notice. About her own writing, Woolf wrote, "though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction, and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw the reader."<sup>15</sup> Laurence notes that "Her novels, then, contain the recognition that it is 'getting the rhythm' in writing that matters. Silence, as much a dimension of rhythm as sound, is part of her thematic and narrative intentions and contributes to her style."<sup>16</sup>

Even this brief overview of a few of the stylistic elements of only one of Woolf's novels offers support for Laurence's claim about Woolf's writing. Earlier I referred the reader to Genette's distinction between narrative time and discourse time. Now I might suggest that there are corresponding silences for both of these kinds of time. I might further suggest that *To the Lighthouse* displays both of these kinds of silence. Narrative time is akin to historicity; it is the historical sense of time in which the novel takes place. The narrative time in this novel is one day, ten years, and one day. The narrative silence that corresponds with narrative time is that silence that removes from the "history" of the artwork all the events that do not make up the work as a whole. Prue Ramsay's wedding and death are part of the narrative silence in *To the Lighthouse*, as are such other details

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15. Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, 181.

16. *Ibid.*

as the name of Lily Briscoe's father, the name of the school the Ramsay children attended, or the color of Mr. Ramsay's eyes.

Discourse time, on the other hand, is the time it takes for storytelling. This sense of time does not have a strong tie to narrative time or to historicity: the description of an event that is only five minutes long in actual lived duration may extend over many pages and so take twice five minutes (or still more) to read. The kind of silence that corresponds to discourse time is more difficult to grasp. If you reduce a narrative artwork to a chronology, the omissions are easy to see—they are the entries for which we have no information. Those are narrative silences. This kind of exercise will not yield up the discursive silences. This kind of silence might be found in the second part of *To the Lighthouse*: the narrative time is long—ten years—but the discourse time is short. The discourse time is not short because nothing happens; rather, it short because there is *nothing to say*.

Narrative silence—the things omitted for the sake of telling just *this* story—is the silence without which we would have no stories, no particular narratives. This is the silence that individuates. Discursive silence, on the other hand, disrupts narrative and, at its most extreme, makes narrative impossible. In Woolf's novel, discursive silence literally breaks through the middle of the novel, rending it in two. The narrative silences shave from the artwork all that is not necessary for artwork to do what it must and what it can. We might now say that the "missing" details in the second part are not narrative silences. The deaths of Mrs. Ramsay and the two Ramsay children, the war in its entirety—these are not the unnecessary details the inclusion of which would bloat the novel or blunt its purpose. These are part of discursive silence. They are as much a part of



the meaning of this novel as any other detail richly described. Their meaning and importance exceed the bounds of language and so their weight can only be shown by breaking the narrative that would contain them.

### Two Silences in *To the Lighthouse*

There is not space to offer all of the silences woven through Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay's relationship; indeed, part of the beauty and elegance of Woolf's writing lies in the connection between all of the silences in the novel and especially between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay, so that discussion of one silence requires the mention of others and focus on any one silence entails an unfaithful lack of attention to the others in the novel. My discussion, therefore, will not be perfectly faithful. Let me admit that at the outset. And yet, it can be significantly faithful and express the extent of my attentive capacity. To that end, I offer one silence pulled from the fabric of their relationship and one silence considered by an observer of that relationship.

#### **Mrs. Ramsay Creates a World of Love**

While Mrs. Ramsay reads to her youngest son, James, in the early evening of the first part of the novel, Mr. Ramsay converses with the philosophy students who have come to see him before spending some time alone striding across the lawn possessed by the poem, "The Charge of the Light Brigade," lines from which he repeats bombastically. While rambling across the grounds and booming out lines like "Someone had blundered," Mr. Ramsay ranges near the house and stops to chat with his wife and son, and the question of the trip to the lighthouse arises again because Mrs. Ramsay is found knitting a stocking for the lighthousekeeper's son. Mr. Ramsay is enraged by what he perceives to be her irrationality, as there is absolutely no chance of a trip to the lighthouse, and he

says so.<sup>17</sup> Mrs. Ramsay, attuned to her son's sensitivity, denies having promised what is out of the question: all she said was that it *might* be fine; no more. He insists. She retreats, bowing her head. He offers, very humbly, to ask the Coastguards if she liked. She declines; he curses and says, "It must rain," and then "It won't rain." She is appeased, he is ashamed, and he walks off again, repeating "Some one had blundered."<sup>18</sup>

Consider the silence of Mrs. Ramsay's response to Mr. Ramsay's angry outburst: "Damn you," he said...Not with the barometer falling and the wind due west." Mrs. Ramsay's response is simply to bow her head. The narrator offers the reader some of Mrs. Ramsay's feelings during the silent interval between Mr. Ramsay's "Damn you," and his humble offer to ask the Coastguards: Mrs. Ramsay is horrified by her husband's "astonishing lack of consideration for other people's feelings"; she is "dazed and blinded" by his cold and unfeeling pursuit of truth.<sup>19</sup> Mrs. Ramsay does not protest, does not even reply, she simply bows her head. "There was nothing to be said."

The narrator's description alerts us to the fact that there were certainly things that could have been vocalized. There is nothing to be said because no argument will sway Mr. Ramsay's overcommitment to truth and undercommitment to relationship. If he does not already value relationship or acknowledge the limits of human certainty or respect the mental and emotional capacities of persons at earlier and lower stages of growth and

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17. In case it is not clear, the trip to the lighthouse will have to be postponed because the weather will turn stormy the following day. Mr. Ramsay checks the barometer and the wind direction and accurately predicts that the weather will not prove fine enough for the trip.

18. Note that the emotional language is taken from the narrated description in the novel. The reader is told that Mrs. Ramsay is horrified, that Mr. Ramsay is enraged, and later, that Mr. Ramsay was ashamed.

19. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 32.

development, then no argument Mrs. Ramsay makes will sway him. Mr. Ramsay does not lack knowledge—he has one of the finest minds in England. He could out-argue her any day. Rather, he lacks vision. Mrs. Ramsay bows her head because there is no argument that can show or prove the limitations of rational arguments. Her bowed head turns does not evoke the unsaid—that which could have been said but was kept unvocalized—but reveals an acknowledgment that her rebuttal is unsayable, that it takes from what is hardly conveyable by words and arguments without breaking down.

Mr. Ramsay's response to his wife's bowed head—silence, an offer to appeal to a more objective authority, and finally, "It won't rain"—signal that he has caught her silent rebuttal, is attempting to mend the "thin veils of civilization" he has so wantonly rent, and values her sense of life and of what is important. They do not volley forth arguments for and against any viewpoint or position. Rather, each yields to the other without ever explicitly saying to the other, "Yes, sure, right, you win; I lose." He offers to appeal to the Coastguards; she says she is "quite ready to take his word for it." At the end, both their values and perspectives are affirmed: Mr. Ramsay is not wrong about the barometer, but tries to accommodate his son's feelings into his articulation of Truth; Mrs. Ramsay is not wrong to shield her son's feelings, but responds to her husband's accurate assessment of the objective facts of pressure and wind.

After striding off, Mr. Ramsay, the philosopher, thinks over his work and specifically on what he perceives as his stalled progress. He longs to have seen more, perceived more, to have achieved a pinnacle of abstract thought—he imagines thought as an alphabet and each bit of progress as a letter. He has achieved Q but cannot, not for any amount of effort, reach R. He imagines himself a lonely and doomed hero, filled with

qualities that, in another arena of human accomplishment, would have deserved accolades and awe. Were he an adventurer leading a doomed polar expedition or a tragic mountain climb, or were he captain of a marooned sea vessel, his qualities would have been hailed as magnificent. As it is, as a philosopher, he feels moored in the sea of Truth, unable to achieve the next uncharted island, capable of heroism, and yet tragically doomed.<sup>20</sup>

Mr. Ramsay returns to Mrs. Ramsay and stands before her “demanding sympathy.” Mrs. Ramsay responds and offers it to him. Mrs. Ramsay pours herself out in an act of creative, responsive love. He holds out to her the raw wound of his sense of doom and failure and asks her to soothe it for him. He thinks of himself as a doomed hero who “requires sympathy and whisky, and some one to tell the story of his suffering to at once.”<sup>21</sup> So he returns to his wife and son, interrupting them, and demands sympathy. Mrs. Ramsay continues to knit the stocking for the lighthousekeeper’s son while reading a fairy story to her son, and here her knitting needles appear as magic wands: “flashing her needles, confident, upright, she created the drawing-room and kitchen, set them all aglow; bade him take his ease there, go in and out, enjoy himself.” She appears as a powerful fairy or good witch, spinning gold from straw, creating a room from a spindle,

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20. The motif of the adventurer will return in chapter four, specifically when I discuss Sara Maitland’s memoir, *A Book of Silence*. The kinds of adventurers noted by Woolf’s narrator all appear in Maitland’s memoir: they typify an adventurous, Romantic quest for and experience of silence. Mr. Ramsay, then, when he ventures into extreme metaphysical terrains, is as solitary and silent as any adventurer; even though he is described (by Mrs. Ramsay, note) as being able to express himself in words, when he pushes forward into the “landscape” of the theoretical sublime, he is alone and silent and as incapable of clear articulation (he cannot quite achieve “R”) as is his wife when she is faced with emotional expression. Mr. Ramsay seems to embody the thought that philosophical innovation is inherently risky.

21. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 33–36.

asking her magical goat to spread a magnificent table where the hungry hero, maligned and abused, can restore his strength.<sup>22</sup> Having sucked nourishment from her words, laughter, and attention, Mr. Ramsay, “filled with her words, like a child who drops off satisfied,” looks “at her with humble gratitude, restored, renewed.”<sup>23</sup>

There is speech involved in this scene. We know that Mr. Ramsay says he is a failure, and that Mrs. Ramsay “blew the words back at him. ‘Charles Tansley...’ she said....Charles Tansley thought him the greatest metaphysician of the time, she said.” Those are the only parts of the dialogue we as readers can accurately discern. The rest is given to silence. We know that Mr. Ramsay demands more than assurance that some dissertating student finds his work worthy, that he demands sympathy. We know that, in some fashion, Mrs. Ramsay offers him the sympathy he craves. Mr. Ramsay wants “to be assured of his genius, first of all, and then to be taken within the circle of life, warmed and soothed, to have his senses restored to him, his barrenness made fertile, and all the rooms of the house made full of life.”<sup>24</sup> Here Mrs. Ramsay becomes the powerful superhuman being who soothes the tired hero. “Flashing her needles,” she gives him just what he craves. He leaves, filled with her words, like an infant full of his mother’s milk, full of gratitude. So there are words involved; with her words and her laughter, she creates for him a world in which he can inhabit. Words come easily to Mr. Ramsay and it

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22. Cf. fairy tales of the Aarne-Thompson type 585 (magical items), of which “Spindle, Shuttle, Needle” is a representative example. In “Spindle, Shuttle, Needle,” an orphaned young maiden wins a princely husband through the magical workings of her enchanted spindle, shuttle, and needle.

23. Woolf *To the Lighthouse*, 37–38.

24. *Ibid.*, 37.

is in the world of words that he feels most at home, so she offers him a world of words that is warm and loving.

We never learn what those words are. More importantly, the words she used are not important. There are no mere words that can themselves create a real world. Words are already abstract, removed. There is nothing actually warm about any word that can be said. What makes a word warm or loving or kind or restorative is everything ineffable surrounding the word that is offered.<sup>25</sup> What made her words effective were things like tone and rhythm and lyricism; a sense of confidence in the reality and truth of her words and a light and kind laughter that makes them cheerful and sweet; the selection of the precise words that would land accurately for her husband, specifically; careful attention and attunement to his state so that she could accurately hit the mark. The words that she actually used were not the life-giving sustenance she offered her husband. Rather, and the narration makes this visible, the sustenance is in the silence suffusing the words that carry the love to him. The omission of these words from the novel is therefore a legitimate narrative silence: the words themselves are not necessary and would not add to the story.

All the things Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay do not say to one another; all the words Mrs. Ramsay offers her husband behind the closed curtain of the narration—these are part of narrative silence. These are the things omitted in the novel that build real silence while also remaining subordinate to the artwork as a whole. By this I mean that the novel would not be improved if someone discovered a transcript of the words Mrs. Ramsay spoke

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25. Cf. Heather Widdows in *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Ashgate, 2005), 57: “Language is not just about written words...but also about tones and gestures and communication between (moral) human beings and importantly relates to the reality of the thoughts, feelings of human beings.”

when she (re)built a habitable world for her husband. Part of the beauty of the silences between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay lies in the fact that we can learn about the creation and maintenance of similar narrative silences outside of novels. When we real flesh-and-blood people refrain from speech, we sometimes create something like narrative silences in our own lives. By attending the kinds of narrative silences the Ramsays create and hold we can learn a little more about who they are—about their moral dispositions—just as we learn about our own characters when we become fluent in detecting the patterns of narrative silences in our lives.

### **Lily Briscoe Tries to Catch the Tune of Mrs. Ramsay**

Lily Briscoe is one of the Ramsays' guests on their summer vacation. She is a painter, an artist, an unmarried woman of thirty-three who keeps house for her father when she is not vacationing with her friends. During her stay with the Ramsays at the beginning of the novel, Lily started a new painting, taking as her theme Mrs. Ramsay at the window reading to James. The difficulty of seeing clearly, of conveying what one sees, of knowing what one feels or thinks about someone, of the desire for expression and the inability to conceive the expression one seeks—these are all descriptions of the questions and musings that fill Lily's narrated internal monologue. Lily does not paint in the pastel and dreamy style fashionable among the painters on the island at the time, but insists upon the primacy of her own vision, regardless of prevailing fashions. Capturing her vision, and her insistence on fidelity to that vision in the face of all obstacles—Charles Tansley hissing, "Women can't write. Women can't paint"; the prevalence of pastels in fashionable painting; the universal and overwhelming difficulty of representing

what one sees and feels—insisting upon her own vision proves to be the overarching challenge Lily faces.<sup>26</sup>

Lily is inspired by Mrs. Ramsay, admires her, is devoted to her. Mrs. Ramsay is the inspiration for Lily's painting and so, in order to do justice to the vision Lily longs to convey, Lily tries to understand Mrs. Ramsay, to capture the sense of her and to find some way of expressing all the feelings for which Lily has no words. Orbiting around the questions that arise regarding Mrs. Ramsay are satellite questions about Mr. Ramsay's work and her admiration for Mr. Bankes; she wonders then how it is we come to conclude that we like someone or dislike them—to which facts is the conclusion "like" or "dislike" tied? Lily does not admire Mrs. Ramsay foolishly, uncritically. During her conversation with Mr. Bankes, she nearly says something critical about Mrs. Ramsay—"how she was alarming, too, in her way, high-handed"—before Mr. Bankes's visible adoration of Mrs. Ramsay arrests Lily's speech.<sup>27</sup> And then Lily thinks that who and what Mrs. Ramsay is for herself, in essence, below what is visible, must differ in some way from the beautiful figure, the "perfect shape which one saw there." Lily tries to think this through: "How did she differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from

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26. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 48; 91; 159.

27. *Ibid.*, 47: "For [Mr. Bankes] to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs. Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to the loves of dozens of young men (and perhaps Mrs. Ramsay had never excited the love of dozens of young men). It was love, she thought, pretending to move her canvas, distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object; but, like the love which mathematicians bear their symbols, or poets their phrases, was meant to be spread over the world and become part of the human gain."



its twisted finger, hers indisputably?... (So she tried to start the tune of Mrs. Ramsay in her head.)”<sup>28</sup>

In her attempt to start the tune of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily runs through images and scenes, memories and tendencies exhibited by Mrs. Ramsay until “she had recovered her sense of her now—this was the glove’s twisted finger. But into what sanctuary had one penetrated?”<sup>29</sup> What follows is Lily’s reflections on the inscrutability of persons. One can be close to another person—physically as close as one could possibly be, possessed of any number of mental or emotional confidences—and yet remain separate, intact, as distinct from that person as from all others. Lily imagines how

in chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through to these secret chambers?<sup>30</sup>

All of us, Lily imagines, are sealed off from all others; how is it we know anything about other people? We sense that someone is full of knowledge and wisdom, that there is kindness and goodness in another, that there is a greatness of spirit or a shameful shallowness in another. But how is it, returning to the question of how we judge that we like or dislike someone, how is it that we know anything about anyone else when the hearts and minds of all around us are sealed?

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28. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 49. Note that the tune metaphor is not explained before or after its introduction. From this point forward, I develop my own interpretation of the idea of the “tune” of a person’s life, and I develop this as a moral thought.

29. *Ibid.*, 50.

30. *Ibid.*, 51.

To gain a sense of Mrs. Ramsay, Lily tries to “start the tune” of her, to notice the things she does and the things she tends to do; notices her tendency to repeat. This restores the sense of Mrs. Ramsay to her while also opening up the question of how and whether that sense of her is real, whether it lands, so to speak, within the real essence of Mrs. Ramsay, whether it can be judged or assessed by or against something indisputable in order to know, at last, whether one had gotten it right. Lily captures the silence of inscrutability in her questions and attempts at understanding. Even the most transparent of us is also or nevertheless inscrutable, unable to be known, fully and completely and accurately to ourselves or to others. The best we can do is to pay attention, to learn the patterns and rhythms and habits that characterize ourselves and those around us, to try to start or hum the “tune” of those to whom we are drawn.

Lily’s reflection on what it means to know a person, what it means to like a person, leads her and us with her to discursive silence. (Mr. Ramsay the philosophical adventurer encounters a different kind of discursive silence.) The aporias we face when we try to unravel what it means to like a person (and not a collection of characteristic behaviors and dispositions); what it means to know a person (rather than to feel ourselves to hold limited and faulty contingent facts about a person)—these usher us into the ineffable.

Lily’s reflections threaten to dissolve her own sense of self. As she tries to catch the tune of Mrs. Ramsay, the distinction between Lily and Mrs. Ramsay becomes blurred, and she envisions losing her own self in the “tune” she picks out: Lily mentally runs over various images, memories, and little scenes of intimacy she has shared with Mrs. Ramsay. She imagines half-defending herself against Mrs. Ramsay’s insistence that an

unmarried woman has missed the best of life; she imagines holding some high-handedness against her; she intuits that Mrs. Ramsay accords Lily's need to paint little significance. But as soon as she caught the tune of Mrs. Ramsay ("the glove's twisted finger"), Lily finds or feels she knows still less than she did before she started. How *does* one go about knowing a person?<sup>31</sup> Mr. Ramsay as philosophical adventurer more clearly faces the threat of dissolution of self and this is why he brings his thinned out self to Mrs. Ramsay to be patched, reknit, and fattened up. If my thoughts on discursive silence appear a bit thin, that can only be expected: how much can I say, directly, about the ineffable?

Lily herself found her expressive capacities stretched to the limits trying to paint her vision of Mrs. Ramsay at the window reading to her son, framed by the window, the stark white wall, and the purple jacmanna (clematis) with their striking colors and unbelievable shadows. Lily persists and succeeds, at the end, much like Mrs. Ramsay succeeded in expressing her love to her husband. Our last moments with Mrs. Ramsay are moments of triumph:

But she could not do it; she could not say it. Then, knowing that he was watching her, instead of saying anything she turned, holding her stocking, and looked at him. And as she looked at him she began to smile, for though she had not said a word, he knew, of course he knew, that she loved him. He could not deny it. And smiling she looked out of the window and said (thinking to herself, Nothing on earth can equal this happiness)—

"Yes, you were right. It's going to be wet tomorrow. You won't be able to go." And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed again. She had not said it: yet he knew.<sup>32</sup>

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31. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 49–51.

32. *Ibid.*, 124. In chapter two, I mentioned briefly Mrs. Ramsay's difficulty in saying the words, "I love you" to her husband. She loved him, he knew she loved him. But the words felt wrong in and out of her mouth, so she found other ways to show her love.

At the end of the novel, it is Lily who triumphs. These are the very last words:

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? She asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.<sup>33</sup>

The first section ends with Mrs. Ramsay's wordless triumph and the third section ends in Lily's wordless triumph. Both create (family, love, community; vision, art, adoration) in silence with the materials at their disposal, and in the end, both Mrs. Ramsay and Lily master the art of silent creation.

### ***The Maytrees: Silence as Moral Growth***

Of Annie Dillard's novel, *The Maytrees*, I could say things like this: Lou is the most silent of the silent characters in the novel. It was her calmness, her stillness that initially drew Toby Maytree to her. *The Maytrees* shows us, better than *To the Lighthouse*, the risk involved in creating a life of which silence is prominent feature. Mrs. Ramsay's non-verbal expressions of love risk misinterpretation, particularly since it was those off-fetishized words that Mr. Ramsay (himself a lover of words) so desired.<sup>34</sup> Woolf's novel does not show what happens when silence is misinterpreted because Mr. Ramsay remains

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33. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 208–09.

34. Compare with Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (New York: Vintage International, 1992). At the opening of the novel, the narrator notes how the words "I love you" have become stripped of all meaning, and have sedimented into habit and thoughtless ritual, have become safe and concealing instead of dangerous and intimate. See, too, Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), which makes a similar point at the end.

willing to receive the love she cannot verbally distill or express. Dillard's novel shows what happens when silence is misinterpreted or when the risk is followed by failure.

The plot of the Dillard's novel is easy to gloss—easier than Woolf's novel: Lou Bigelow meets Toby Maytree shortly after she returns to her hometown of Provincetown in Cape Cod as a new college graduate. Their meeting takes place not long after the end of the second World War. After what appears to be a relatively brief (by current standards) courtship, they marry. They have a son and live happily together until the evening, after fourteen years of marriage, that Maytree informs Lou that he will be moving to Maine. The next day he and Deary, one of Lou and Toby's closest friends, move to Maine where they live together for the next twenty years. Maytree and Deary return to Provincetown when an injured Maytree is unable to nurse Deary, who is dying. They come to Lou, who opens her house to her husband and his partner. For the next five years after Deary's death, Lou and Maytree live in intimate companionship ended only by Maytree's death. Lou lives another fifteen years beyond that and then dies alone in her beloved shack on the dunes by the sea.

#### Style and Structure in *The Maytrees*

In structure, style, and rhythm, *The Maytrees* is sparer than *To the Lighthouse*. One of the effects of silence in the novel is the creation of distance: the bareness of the narrative holds the reader at arms' length, keeps the reader at a respectable distance. Just as none of us in "real life" are or could be privy to every thought, feeling, action, or word developed or committed by even those to whom we are most close, neither will we be permitted that fantasy in the novel, either. The reader is refused details about so much of the dailiness of the lives of the characters of whom we read, even as we are given good reason to believe

that the characters are intimately familiar with those same details about one another. In this way, *The Maytrees* produces and preserves even more narrative silence than does *To the Lighthouse*.

The structure of *The Maytrees*, like that of *To the Lighthouse*, provides for the reader a strong guide for how to accord interpretive weight to the events in the novel. There are seven parts to the novel, and they are not equal in length; the length of the section does not always correspond to the amount of time (the narrative time) that the section covers. The seven parts are these: Prologue (5 pages; indeterminate time), Preface (52 pages; covers between 14 and 16 years), Part One (32 pages; covers about a year and a half), Interlude (37 pages; covers 20 years), Part Two (36 pages; covers a few months), Part Three (25 pages; covers 6 months), and an Epilogue (17 pages; covers 5 years). By the names of the sections, we know where the main or most important “story” in the novel should be found: parts one, two, and three are, by their names, meant to be the story proper. The prologue, preface, interlude, and epilogue, though they comprise the bulk of the novel in both page count and time span (111 pages; 40 years), and though the majority of what can be called “action” occurs in these sections, they are to be weighted less heavily than parts one, two, and three. To keep things clear, I will describe each section of the book.

### **Prologue**

When the novel opens, the reader is thrust into the story like a vacationer arrived in Provincetown for a summer season or two. In the first pages the narrator adopts the tone of a storyteller with a captive audience: “Theirs became quite a story, a story still

told.”<sup>35</sup> The story of the Maytrees is given to us, at the beginning, as a local tale we might find interesting. And, as outsiders, it makes sense that we will have missed many things—we were not “there” to witness them. Of course the storyteller will pass over things to present the story in a manageable fashion. As outsiders we might have patience for a tale; we are less likely to have such patience for an exhaustive chronicle. The prologue begins at some indeterminate time after the events of the story, presumably after Lou Maytree has died (so at least 57 years after the novel opens). The reader is told that the story of the Maytrees “became quite a story” before the narrator moves along to give a short précis of their life together.<sup>36</sup> We get facts—some small, some broad—about their life together. The tone is easy and light. We are told of Lou’s silence three times in five pages.

### **Preface**

The preface begins the day Lou and Toby Maytree meet, decades earlier than the prologue that precedes it. When the novel opens, Lou is about 23 years old, and Maytree is about 27, “back home in Provincetown after the war.”<sup>37</sup> The voice shifts between the prologue and the preface. The prologue is narrated by some personality outside Lou and Toby, probably younger than both of them, still alive, telling what can be known of them from the perspective of time and local history. In the preface, however, we begin inside

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35. Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins), 2.

36. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 2.

37. *Ibid.*, 7.

Toby Maytree's head in the first chapter, switch to Lou's for the second and then we mingle among them, already family.<sup>38</sup>

The narrative time is long and the discourse time is short so things move quite swiftly. One page after Lou and Maytree meet, we know that he is courting her, even if in a silent, concealed fashion. Fifteen pages later, we attend their engagement party. Twenty-four pages after the engagement party, a few years after marriage, the baby arrives, suddenly, like a surprise. Petie grows twelve years in just about five pages and we are not present for either his first steps or at his first day of school. As in *To the Lighthouse*, the ages and anniversaries come almost as an afterthought, punctuating the narrative flow. The tempo is very fast in the prologue, with the years flying by under the smooth silence of conversation and thought. This section ends in the winter fourteen years after Lou and Maytree married.

### **Part One**

Part One of the novel begins in the fourteenth year of the Maytrees' marriage, on the night Petie is hit by a car (fear not—he only broke his leg). That night, while Petie sleeps, Maytree announces his betrayal. Lou and Toby may have spent over five thousand days together but the reader has spent a scant sixty-five pages with them before Maytree cried and began “I will always love you. Believe me.”<sup>39</sup>

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38. I ought to point out that the chapters here are unmarked, signaled only by a (possibly) blank verso page and a larger top margin on the facing recto. Also, for most of the novel, Toby Maytree is simply called “Maytree.”

39. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 65.



The narrative time in Part One is relatively short, covering just one-and-a-half years' time in 32 pages. We open on the night on which Petie broke his leg and Maytree tells Lou he will leave in the morning. For the next year and a half, Lou keeps busy and tries to rationalize Maytree's absence until suddenly time and solitude catch up with her and she falls apart: "She had no force to fight what held her as wind pins paper to a fence. She was a wood horse, a rock cairn, a jerry can of pitch. She found herself holding one end of a love. She reeled out love's long line alone; it did not catch. / She fell apart. She should have lashed her elbows and knees, like Aleuts."

The reader never learns what falling apart looks like for Lou, but one morning, near the end of Part One, (near the end of the year and a half span Part One covers) her friend Cornelius alerts her to her own bitterness and Lou begins to take a hard and honest look at herself. She climbs the 116 steps of Pilgrim Monument to gain perspective and decides up top that there is something she can do: she could "work on herself as a task."<sup>40</sup>

The narrative flow twice falls apart in Part One after Maytree abandons Lou. The narrative progression falls apart at the same time that Lou falls apart. There are two places in this section where time skips: right after Maytree tells Lou he will leave and right after Lou determines that she can work on herself as a task. In the first instance, the reader is pulled back from the flow of the story by a more distant narrative voice. The narrator begins the chapter by recounting a folk tale told by the Nauset tribes on Cape Cod: the mythical founder of the tribes, assured of their well-being after the development of agriculture, became a star in the night sky. The narrator ends the first part of the

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40. Information about Pilgrim Monument retrieved from <http://www.pilgrim-monument.org/overview-faq>; Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 91.

chapter by saying “The Maytrees performed no heroic deeds, neither Toby nor Lou, and both acted within any decent heart’s scope. They became not constellations but corpses.”<sup>41</sup> In the second half of this chapter, the story jumps ahead thirty-nine years and tells the story of Lou’s last months and death. Eighty-year old Lou died alone in her beloved beach shack. The reader learns the story of Lou’s death before Maytree has even moved out of the house, before having any inkling about Lou’s life after having been betrayed.

The narration returns to the story at hand after telling about Lou’s death. Maytree, who had gone for a walk before the first narrative skip, returned from his walk and joined Lou in their bed for the last time before his departure. From there, he and Deary leave, Lou tries to rationalize her way into acceptance and happiness, we learn that Lou fell apart, Cornelius confronts Lou, and Lou climbs Pilgrim Monument for the first time. Narrative time speeds up after Lou’s first ascent: within a few short paragraphs, the reader is told, briefly, of Lou’s insights after a month, after two months, after seven months. And then time skips for a second time. Having begun to see, at the end of her first year of learning to let go and learning to see herself, Lou wonders “If overcoming self-centeredness was the goal, then why were we born into a selfish stew? And who even studied this question?”<sup>42</sup> Immediately following is this: “Two decades later, as it happened, while she was washing around Deary’s deepest and most noisome bedsore, she

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41. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 80.

42. *Ibid.*, 92–3.

asked herself: if she, Lou, had known how long her first half-inch beginning to let go would take... would she have begun?"<sup>43</sup>

These interruptions break up the narrative time and disruptions, following the discussion about *To the Lighthouse*, can be a clue that there may be silence to find and attend. What is it that disrupts chronological time in Part One? The first disruption depicts Lou's death and the second disruption reveals Lou's self-growth. In her memoir, *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland introduces an archaic Scottish word, "outwith" which means "that which is not within."<sup>44</sup> Since her memoir is about silence, she uses the word "outwith" to refer to that which cannot be contained within language. Death, as Woolf's novel showed, is outwith language. Lou's death in *The Maytrees* is outwith narrative chronology—there is no elegant place for Lou's death in the structure of the novel or of the lives her death affects. Her death bursts through the story at an unexpected and inconvenient place. As death does.

Lou's self-growth, which I will discuss in greater detail below, is outwith language in a different sense. The change in Lou's character does not end a narrative the way death does. Instead, the change in Lou's character is the result of the disruption of a characteristic pattern of moral behaviors and the simultaneous introduction of a new pattern. In order to create something new, there has to be a break with the old. The disrupted narrative presents to the reader a break that mirrors the break in Lou's life—and that reflects the break that any of us must permit if we are to create something new with

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43. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 93.

44. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 27. I develop this argument about disruption as a signal for silence in much greater detail in chapters five and six.

the patterns of our own (moral) lives. As my argument develops, disruption will become more clearly associated with and more strongly signal silence.

### **Interlude**

The Interlude covers twenty years' time in which Petie grows up and marries; Maytree and Deary build a life in Maine; Lou continues her life and her self-growth and, at the end of the section, sends a friendly thought-greeting ("Hallo!") Maine-ward. Twenty years pass in a scant thirty-seven pages. The tempo (the narrative time) in the Interlude—faster than that of the Preface, the fastest in the novel—produces great rhythmic chunks. We learn on a large scale what develops, shifts, and repeats. Instead of diurnal rhythms, we get those of decades.

That this is called an interlude clues the reader to the relative importance of this section. You need this stuff, some of it, to understand the real story at hand. But this is not the real story. Or, this is not the story being told. In a different novel, the events in this section would be prominent. We, however, are being told that the real story lies elsewhere; this is not a story about what happens to the Maytrees, but about what the Maytrees *do* and who the Maytrees *become*.

### **Parts Two and Three; the Epilogue**

Parts Two and Three are kept together in the telling of this story and there is no hard separation between them. In page length, Part Two is almost identical to the Interlude. In narrative time, it is much shorter: Part Two covers only a few months' time instead of the twenty years that pass in the Interlude. Part Three begins when Maytree and Deary enter Lou's house. In Part Three, which covers the six months it takes for Deary to die, time slows. This is the shortest section in terms of span of time—only six

months pass in this section and the main event is Deary's death. In this section, diurnal rhythms prevail. The writing feels no less spare—silences can fill whole minutes as well as years.

Unlike the other sections, the Epilogue follows after Part Three with no visual separation. It flows from the story being offered and the reader is permitted to think of it as of a piece with that story. In the Epilogue, time speeds a touch. There are five years in the Epilogue. Five last years for Maytree and Lou to spend together before Maytree dies. They live together again, tenderly, but with relish. If their first years were spent primarily in a simple harmony (and sometimes in unison), their last years are spent in a more complex composition, sometimes in pleasing dissonance. The novel ends with Maytree's death at home, fifteen years before Lou will die in their beloved beach shack.

#### Two Silences in *The Maytrees*

##### **Lou Gets the Tip from Cornelius**

After Maytree ran off with Deary, Lou made every attempt to behave beautifully. “Lou found no comfort in friends’ disparaging either Deary or Maytree. What about her loyalty to both? They had a right to live as best they could.”<sup>45</sup> Rationally speaking, Maytree's decision makes sense to her: he fell in love with Deary; he had pulled away from his love with Lou; he felt himself unable to continue with her. Lou does her very best to move on and to find the good in her situation: No one interrupts her reading. There is no one chattering at her most of the time. She has the dune shack all to herself. She has endless time, now, to think about everything. Still, one morning, her friend

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45. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 87.

Cornelius shows up at her door: “Say Lou, I wish you’d stop poisoning yourself. She did not whine or voice any grief or anger. Did it show?”<sup>46</sup>

The reader is never told of any of the poisonous thoughts and feelings that Lou may have had. We are continually reminded of Lou’s reticence in the novel. When Lou does talk about Maytree and Deary’s elopement, the things she says are reasonable, generous, and, on the evidence we have, unimpeachable. Nevertheless, Lou’s response to Cornelius that morning he appeared at her door and said he wished she’d stop poisoning herself was not one of indignation or denial or self-justification. She acknowledges the poison. “Did it show?” Immediately afterward, we are told that after Cornelius left, Lou climbed the street to Pilgrim Monument, climbed again to the top of the monument and looked out below. “She was ready to want to stop this. Thereby she admitted—barely—that she could choose to stop. For one minute by her watch, she imagined liking Maytree impartially. For only one minute by her watch she saw him for himself.”<sup>47</sup>

In *Intelligent Virtue*, Julia Annas tells us that the enkratic “does what is tactful, brave, or beneficent, but does not have the right feelings about it, whereas the virtuous person does.”<sup>48</sup> The primary difference between the virtuous person and the merely self-controlled, or enkratic person, lies in the difference of feeling between the two kinds of moral agent. The enkratic does just what is right but does not find doing what is right pleasant and desirable. From the outside, however, the virtuous and the enkratic should

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46. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 91.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67.

not look very different (or the enkratic person would be obviously vicious). On the inside, assuming one could see someone else's inside, the difference would be marked. The self-controlled person would reveal her lack of love for virtue. Moreover, it is not a problem of reason, but of feeling. It is for this reason that Iris Murdoch writes that "It is small use telling oneself 'Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.' What is needed is an orientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source."<sup>49</sup> The self-controlled but not-yet virtuous person cannot simply tell herself "Be just." For the shift from beautiful but hollow behavior, something else internal must happen, something new, unpredictable, and surprising.

Lou's work in the monument re-orientes her. Lou, naturally reticent, had developed habits of being silent. Those habits were not moral habits until she began to reflect upon them and what they concealed. Indeed, for Lou to shift her orientation, she had to be willing to see herself clearly and to risk letting go of her customary assessments and values in order to make room for new ones to grow. For reorientation to be possible, it is necessary to let go of or to yield what one does believe, feel, or see, in order to create new ways for valuing. It is necessary to disrupt or break the old patterns of belief, feeling, attention, and behavior and create new patterns. Lou had been clinging to what was and what she believed ought to have been. She developed truly moral habits after she began letting go of fantasy by learning to see and live with what is real.<sup>50</sup>

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49. Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'" in *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2009), 54.

50. Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 57. Chapter six will argue in greater detail for the moral worth of the distinction between reality and fantasy.

From the time that Maytree left until the time that Cornelius confronted her, Lou was not growing in virtue. The happiness of her life and her natural reticence combined to make the nature of her moral life and character ambiguous. She was not obviously vicious—she was kind and laughed often and opened up her home to others—but neither also was she clearly virtuous: she had not had many opportunities for revealing herself to be either. Annas writes that “the direction of the virtuous life is less obvious from external observation and may be clear only when we can take into account the person’s reasons and feelings as well as his actions (something which almost none of us is in a position to do).”<sup>51</sup> Generally speaking our moral lives are invisible, even silent, to others. The effects of our moral choices and inclinations may become apparent, but the state of our heart and the extent of our feelings about our moral commitments and choices are not openly available to all who know and see us, let alone to ourselves. Sometimes, someone can have a moment of just this kind of insight into some other person’s behavior and character to be able to locate the coordinates of someone’s moral position. Lou herself had lost her moorings, morally speaking. Her friend figured out where she was and helped her to see it. Once Lou knew where she had gotten to, she was able to chart her recovery. Once Lou knew herself to have been “found out” she learned to find herself out and Lou transitioned from self-control to virtue after Cornelius’s confrontation.

### **Lou Acknowledges Moral Growth**

Beginning with her first trip to the monument, Lou learns how to re-see her husband and herself—to re-orient herself in Murdoch’s terms. This is difficult work, and

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51. Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 117.



initially, Lou is not ready to stop “being in love, stop feeling resentment”; she was only, a year and a half after Maytree left, ready to *want* to stop. That she chooses as her first action toward that end to imagine “liking Maytree impartially” lets the reader know that she retained feelings of partiality for Maytree; that for one minute she “saw him for himself” lets the reader know that otherwise she sees Maytree in his connections to others, in his other relationships and roles and duties: she has been insisting on Maytree the failed husband, Maytree the absent father, Maytree the new lover, Maytree the carpenter, Maytree the poet, Maytree the long-time and no-more friend of all those he left behind. For sixty seconds (Lou is timing her work), Lou imagines Maytree just for himself, clearing away the tendrils of other commitments and relationships. Afterward, “here was something she could do. She could climb the mountain every day and work on herself as a task. She had nothing else to do. Their years together were good. He was already gone. All she had to do for peace was let him go.” Lou’s relinquishment of any claim over her husband has nothing to do with anything Maytree does; letting go is inner work that Lou undertakes on her own. She disrupts old patterns and makes space for the creation of something new. Thus begins the beginning of Lou’s achievement of a morally admirable silence.

Learning to see her own bitterness requires physical, mental, and emotional space. Lou has to gain distance from herself and her habits in order to learn to see it—she creates a new habit of climbing the monument for a panoramic view of sea and city in order to create a new way of seeing herself and her relations to the world.<sup>52</sup> Prior to

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52. Consider how Felix Adler describes the moral silence that attends intervening ellipses or pauses during which impulse is overcome: “The really moral person is one who keeps perpetually before his eyes the outspread world of the moral relationships,—that is to say, who sees what his

Cornelius's reproach and her commitment to rooting out bitterness, Lou was unwilling to look closely at her inner self: "It was fearsome down there, a crusty cast-iron pot. Within she was empty. She would never poke around in those terrors and wastes again, so help her God."<sup>53</sup> Nearly twenty years later, Lou's assessment of her inner self and of moral work has shifted:

If she, Lou, had known how long her first half-inch beginning to let go would take—and how long her noticing and renouncing owning and her turning her habits, and beginning the slimmest self-mastery whose end was nowhere in sight—would she have begun?...Consciously she looked out for resentment, self-cherishing, and envy. Over the years she formed the habit of deflecting them before they dug in. But she lived through those years in any case, and now she lived from that steady ground she won.<sup>54</sup>

### **What is Moral Silence (Like)?**

Since this dissertation is a philosophical undertaking, it seems appropriate to ask whether any other philosopher has discovered a way to talk productively about kinds of silence and what these different kinds of silence do, what different kinds of silence make possible. There is to my knowledge only one explicitly philosophical attempt to lay out

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relations ought to be as in an ideal landscape" from "The Moral Value of Silence," *International Journal of Ethics* 8 no. 2 (1898), [88].

53. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 86.

54. Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 93. Recall that, although this assessment takes place twenty years after Maytree left Lou for Deary, it appears in the narrative only a year and a half later, right after Lou begins her moral undertaking. The reader sees the result of twenty years' moral work spread across facing pages. The reader, therefore, feels Lou's moral growth as a natural narrative progression. Lou experiences her moral growth differently. For Lou, there is no conclusion or ending to moral work. For Lou, the process of growing is filled with setbacks and continual beginnings. Only the reader is permitted to experience Lou's growth as a narrative with a set beginning and a satisfying conclusion with presumed linear progress in the middle.

categories of moral silence, and that in a 16-page article written at the fin de siècle.<sup>55</sup>

Felix Adler offers brief descriptions of silence that, among studies of silence, often come close to indicating what I find compelling about silence. Words, for example, can hardly convey the weight or depth of certain feelings. Adler points “as a first instance of the unspeakable, gratitude” saying that “when infinite thanks are called for, we find ourselves to be poor in thanks, not because we do not feel the gratitude, but because the instrument of human language cannot convey what we feel.”<sup>56</sup>

Lily Briscoe has a thought very like this when she tries to understand her own impulse

to fling herself (thank Heaven she had always resisted so far) at Mrs. Ramsay’s knee and say to her—but what could she say to her? “I’m in love with you?” no, that was not true. “I’m in love with this all,” waving her hand at the hedge, at the house, at the children. It was absurd, it was impossible.<sup>57</sup>

Lily finds that language cannot express the fullness of the feeling. She tries to convey it through her painting, but that, too is nearly impossible: “it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed.”<sup>58</sup>

Adler notes, too, the silence of tact and discretion, which certainly infuses Mrs. Ramsay’s sensitivity to her children and to her guests. He names, too, the silence of privacy, which I discussed in chapter two, particularly in the section about early moderns

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55. Perhaps I could consider for inclusion Robert Eli Sanchez Jr., “The Virtues of Irony and Silence: An Ethical Reading of Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein” (PhD diss. University of California–Riverside, 2012).

56. Felix Adler, “The Moral Value of Silence,” *International Journal of Ethics* 8 no. 2 (1898), 79–80.

57. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 19.

58. *Ibid.*

and recusancy. Adler's most valued moral silence, however, is the silence of the ellipse, the silence of "intervals, during which is being revolved and matured in the mind the right utterance that is to come afterwards."<sup>59</sup> The highest moral value is an intervening ellipsis that creates the space for moral reflection. Adler does not suggest that the "right utterance" that is to follow the intervening space be any kind of conventionally moral pronouncement or appraisal. The "right utterance" may be an otherwise everyday statement that achieves the right tone as a result of reflection.<sup>60</sup>

Unfortunately, Adler's otherwise interesting, compelling, and fitting work is so short and so general it cannot do more than paint in broad strokes what I am trying to fill in with finer detail. Because this is a work of moral philosophy, allow me to discuss, briefly, what it is that Dauenhauer writes about moral discourse and the silences found there before returning to a different iteration of the intervening ellipse. Moral discourse is the sum of utterances and silences that make up appraisal and the yielding of particular appraisals to a hypothetical omnitemporal court of appraisers that transforms the particular appraisal into one appropriate for a moral Everyman to utter.<sup>61</sup> It is not

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59. Adler, "The Moral Value of Silence," 87–88. Note that Adler's "principal thought" is not wholly missing from all other works of moral philosophy. For example, Daniel C. Maguire writes "that is why ethics must pause for the 'reverent stillness' of contemplation" (*The Moral Choice* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978], 152). However, he does not say more about what that stillness is, or is like, or does; neither does he offer clear reasons for that contemplation that are themselves clearly connected to the experience thereof. This is not a criticism of his work; I just want to emphasize the lack of explicit description of the pause, stillness, silence, etc., that precedes action or judgment.

60. I will return to the moral importance of getting the right tone and the silence that surrounds it in chapter five when I discuss Martha Nussbaum's invocation of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*.

61. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 41, 43; the gendered language is Dauenhauer's.

important for moral utterances who it is offering the appraisal; rather, any particular utterance is morally valid so long as it is not important to the sense of it that it be the particular utterance of anyone at all. Indeed, this universality and omnitemporality are the guarantors of radical equality in the moral realm.<sup>62</sup>

My project is neither an extension or refutation (or endorsement) of what Dauenhauer says about moral appraisals and utterances. My focus is not moral discourse—moral utterances and appraisals—but rather moral life, the stuff about which moral utterances and appraisals could be made. What I find interesting, morally speaking, are actions, attitudes, behaviors, habits, tendencies to repeat and the attention given and response offered by ourselves and by those around us that follow therefrom.

The silences in *To the Lighthouse* and in *The Maytrees* are not like the silences found in what we ordinarily consider to be moral discourse. The silences I have described depend for their sense and for their value upon the particularity of the actors—the silences and responses are not those that could be offered by a “moral Everyman” but can only be offered and given because of the particular situation and relationship from which the silences arise. These silences do not exist as part of moral “discourse,” and yet I claim them for moral life—these are part of what it means to be a moral subject and a moral actor.

Dauenhauer’s category of moral discourse does not fit the silences I offer. Let us consider instead the silence Dauenhauer calls “intervening” silence and the discourse he calls “artistic discourse” and consider whether there might not yet be something from

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62. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 42.

Dauenhauer's phenomenology that can be informative for my ethics. Both Patricia Laurence and Dauenhauer write about the silence that produces the rhythm and pacing of written texts (and conversations, stories, music, and drama as well), and this is what Dauenhauer calls "intervening silence." This is the silence that distinguishes individual words and phrases from one another to a listener and reader familiar with the patterns of a language, and it is "at work in the pacing of a literary work." Thus, this is the silence that produces the sense of time (narrative and discourse) in the work.

The silence in the pacing of literary art he identifies as one instance of the rhythmic function of intervening silence:

These occurrences of silence are just as essential to the rhythm and totality as are any of the sound phrases which make up the utterance. The appropriate number, placement, and duration of intervening silences are just as important to the dramatic, if not to the lexical, sense of the story as the appropriately proportioned length, internal balance, etc., of the sound phrases.<sup>63</sup>

These rhythmic silences inflect and inform timing and pacing. Thus, "intervening silence has its own temporal structure in addition to the temporal structure it has by reason of being a concrete utterance" (which is to say, anything uttered is already in time).<sup>64</sup> Here Dauenhauer comes close to acknowledging what Genette found in his study of narrative discourse: there are at least two distinct senses of time in written (particularly narrative) artwork. Dauenhauer attends the silence that helps to produce these senses of time in artistic discourse and Genette attends the discourse that results from these temporalities.

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63. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 7.

64. *Ibid.*

Here, my attention is drawn to the cooperation of silence and time in the act of moral creation.

There is also the melodic function of intervening silence. Dauenhauer writes that the “melodic function...involves an apparent closing-opening operation” and associates the melodic function of intervening silence with particular sound phrases. So intervening silence has both a melodic and a rhythmic function wherein the melodic is found in the beginning and ending of particular sound phrases and the rhythmic is found in the pacing, repetition, duration, and number of the sound phrases. Moreover, intervening silence produces its own sense of time, and this is probably most closely associated with the rhythmic aspect of this type of silence.

Dauenhauer relies on artistic imagery and terminology to describe intervening silence: in music the terms “rhythm,” “melody,” “tempo,” are possibly most at home. Dauenhauer refers the reader to the intervening silence at work in the pacing of a joke, a story, or a dramatic scene. Though Dauenhauer claims that this holds for all kinds of discourse, and not just musical, let us continue with the artistic exploration and consider what Dauenhauer has to say about artistic discourse. What is required for artistic discourse is an art object or an art work; a “plurality of privileged moments”; uncertainty and risk; and the imperfect agency of both the author and the appraising audience.

Regarding the artwork itself, it must be distinct and complete; artworks are a kind of thing that permit and even invite engagement and commitment to any multitude of other artworks; they require sensuous manifestation and appreciation; they can be lost and found again, either physically or emotionally. By “plurality of privileged moments,” Dauenhauer indicates the ability of an artwork to be “fresh” at many times and an

unpredictable number of times throughout its existence. A new artwork may dazzle and impress with its freshness, but so too may an old, forgotten artwork be remembered and dazzle as devastatingly as a new artwork. There is no limit to the number of times this can happen and no way of determining at the outset whether it will happen at all. This is part of the risk attached to an artwork's status as art.

The other part of the risk inheres in the persons receiving the artwork. The artist, however much she may try to produce something "fresh" cannot guarantee the worth or relevance of the artwork. All the artist can do is create and then learn whether or not there are others who engage with and commit to the vision or experience elicited by the artwork in question. Likewise, the audience is made up of all who interact with the artwork in question. However, no one member of this audience, and no segment or subset of that audience has the power to determine universally the relevance of the artwork or its lack thereof. If any one person finds the artwork fresh or relevant in any way, then the artwork has freshness or relevance. The audience for an artwork has not the same universal power as the omnitemporal court of appraisers has for a moral utterance.

Artistic discourse, then, appears to be the result of the interaction of artist, artwork, and audience. What is customary or habitual, what is "sedimented in routine" is surrendered in order to make room for "new expressions of the meaning of reality to be articulated."<sup>65</sup> The yielding—which is a signal in Dauenhauer's writing for silence—in artistic discourse

binds author and audience together in a unique way. The bonds between them are not pretested by time....In the yielding which is intertwined with artistic utterance, both author and audience assume risks. The author risks being either

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65. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 47.



unintelligible or not understood. The audience risks either wasting its resources or having its stable world shaken.<sup>66</sup>

In artistic discourse, silence produces a unique relationship between author and audience: there is no habit, no routine on which to fall back. The author, intuiting or acknowledging the imperfection of all the human utterances (and here are meant actions, words, and creations), steps beyond what has come before to offer something that has not been done; the audience, willing to believe in what might be made possible by something new, offers up the stifling, rigid stability of its world as material for creation. If the artist is successful, the audience will find the creation sufficiently intelligible and challenging and so gain by the relationship; if the audience can meet the artist in the artistic project, then the artist will have been understood and be vindicated in her attempt at creation. The artist and audience are mutually dependent upon one another for the production of what is new, “fresh,” relevant, challenging, or expressive of some underdeveloped, unarticulated, lost, or recovered thought or feeling.

Artistic discourse and intervening silence are closely linked. Both depend upon pattern, particularity, risk, and limitation. When the artwork is lyrical in some way—musical, dramatic, poetic, or narrative—then the link between artistic discourse and intervening silence are quite apparent: in a poem or novel or musical composition, the artist relies upon the intervening silences of rhythm, pacing, melody, repetition, and dynamic stresses in order to create a work of art. In the physical arts, the intervening silences are less apparent, but no less extant; think chiaroscuro, horizon, fore- and background, the drama of line and shape, and the harmony of proportion. The intervening

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66. Ibid.

silences help to make the particular artwork what it is; the silence of yielding and binding of artistic discourse highlights the risks taken in the act of creation and they insert the artwork into the world where it becomes an object for engagement and relationship.

I am therefore arguing for the artistic nature of moral life. Moral life may be considered moral artwork and therefore be linked to the intervening silences of rhythm, pacing, and repetition. Moral life is an art of performance and response; in moral life, we are bound together in such a fashion and to such a degree that we assume risks. In the creative aspect of moral life, we “risk being either unintelligible or not understood”; as witnesses and participatory audiences to other people’s moral actions, we risk “either wasting [our] resources or having [our] stable world shaken.”<sup>67</sup>

When Lou began her reorienting work in the monument, what else did she do but to surrender what was customary or habitual in order to make room for “new expressions of the meaning of reality to be articulated,”—what else did she do but create in risk and silence like an artist? Lou’s moral growth is an example of moral creativity. She discards the sedimented layers of pattern and habit in order to make space for something new, something surprising; what was surprising and new was an ability to let go of bitterness and to grow in compassion. This new thing is unmistakably moral. Moral growth is the art of yielding and response; it is the rhythm of alternating yielding and responding that pulls us beyond customary, rote answers to the question “How shall I live?” The yielding silence of artistic discourse, Dauenhauer writes,

is motivated by a twofold recognition. On the one hand, every previous human utterance and deed, taken either singly or in collections, is seen to have failed to

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67. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 47. This brings me into what Alexander Nehamas describes as a philosophical tradition devoted to the art of living in *The Art of Living*, 104.

articulate or even to prepare for the articulation of what is presently available for utterance. On the other hand, both the author and audience take themselves to be capable, for the first time ever, respectively of uttering and of hearing something new. Together they embark on a new venture.<sup>68</sup>

Previous answers to the question of how to live are not taken to have been false or harmful. They are taken to have failed—faultlessly and necessarily—to have conveyed everything that could be conveyed by any genuine attempt at an answer. The question is always a live one; we have not discovered the definitive answer to the question of how to live. Therefore, new answers are not only continually possible, they are continually required, and an artistic sensibility, impelled by the freshness of creation, is therefore also required for necessarily artistic moral living.

What the novels reveal in their narrative rhythm, pacing, and melody are the patterns according to which a life can be organized and re-organized artistically and therefore morally speaking.<sup>69</sup> The novels reflect the possibilities for life and for living; the novels model the silences that inflect lives, and particularly moral life. In both the novels, we learn, better than we did in Dauenhauer's description, what the silences of rhythm and melody look like, and how they function. We can then extrapolate to envision the silences of rhythm and melody over the course of an actual life. In the novels we see patterns—and what are rhythm, pacing, melody, tempo but different ways of making and seeing patterns?—patterns of risk, patterns of failure, patterns of generosity, motifs of growth and change, melodies of beauty, of inquisitiveness, of creation. The patterns we

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68. Dauenhauer, *Silence*, 47.

69. Compare with Michael Slote's claim to be "making ethics in certain ways seem more like aesthetics, because like the latter, we are committed to criticizing and praising without blaming" in *From Morality to Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p 121.

learn to see in novels parallel the patterns we can learn to see in the lives we live outside of artistic experience.

Lily “tried to start the tune of Mrs. Ramsay”—to note the patterns and rhythms and melody that signal the life of Mrs. Ramsay particularly. What does Lily hit upon? She pictures Mrs. Ramsay coming to Lily’s room late at night to talk over what had happened that day; Mrs. Ramsay laughing; Mrs. Ramsay insisting that everyone must marry; Mrs. Ramsay growing sad and deflating under the weight of darker thoughts; Mrs. Ramsay imperious, simple, calm, and then clear and certain. The reader sees all this, too. Over the course of a hundred pages or so, the reader sees nearly all of these things happen only not condensed as in Lily’s thoughts. The tune of Mrs. Ramsay is as available to the reader as to Lily who also is given Mrs. Ramsay’s insistence upon the importance that everyone marry, her darkening thoughts, her acknowledgment of her own insistence and her need to cover over something she refuses to share; the reader also notices Mrs. Ramsay’s capacity for a certain tinge of maliciousness; notices the narrator’s and characters’ attribution of simplicity and calm to her. The rhythms of Mrs. Ramsay are pulled along by the birth of children alternating with her husband’s deep need for her capacity for sympathy and nurturing. The melody is carried by Mrs. Ramsay’s stunning beauty and generous impulses.

The pacing of *To the Lighthouse* makes the rhythms in each section more apparent. The first section, which is the bulk of the novel (121 pages), covers the space of only several hours on one day. The second section, “Time Passes,” covers ten years in twenty pages. The final section, “The Lighthouse,” requires only 68 pages to relate the events of most of one day ten years after the dinner party that ended the first section. The

least number of words and pages cover the greatest span of time and the greatest number of words are devoted to conveying just the right sense of the smallest space of time in the novel. The novel is syncopated, the stress falls at the outer beats of the novel. What is important is the sense of human life and relationship, and this is silently conveyed through pattern and pace.

Patricia Laurence notes the musical metaphors for Woolf's writing: "Larger musical structures beyond the sentence that support Woolf's works are apparent in the metaphors of critics." *To the Lighthouse*, she notes, has been compared to a sonata; the fluidity of her writing is girded by "patterning of sound, silence, and motion" to produce a stable and lofty architecture.<sup>70</sup> My association of Woolf with music is thus not unusual in the least. What may be less usual is my insistence that Woolf's internal and overarching structures in *To the Lighthouse* are not unlike the structuring of a human moral life.

The sparseness of *The Maytrees* offers a different sense of pacing and tempo. In Dillard's novel, the sparseness of the prose mirrors life in a different way. The narrative skips over so many of the details that would have filled the Maytrees' lives: the reader is not invited to Lou and Toby's wedding, for example. After Petie is born, every few paragraphs the reader finds he has grown another three years—how quickly they grow up! The reader is not even invited into Lou's house until just about the time Maytree announces his plan to move to Maine with Deary. The reader is kept at a distance from the characters in the novel. We might get to "hear" what goes on inside in Lou's head and

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70. Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, 185; 184.

inside Maytree's heart, but we are not permitted inside their kitchen. The pacing and the silences of omission here reflect a particular feature of life, deeply important to moral life: we simply are not given unlimited access to those to whom we relate morally. We want to know all the facts of a case before we decide how we will assess or act? Well, we will wait eternally, then, because it is just not the case that we will ever have sufficient information to act with felt authority when someone betrays us or someone we love. And our desire for information (what color is Lou's kitchen? What is Mrs. Ramsay's name?) will not translate to a right to receive it. Given that which we see and that which we are permitted to see, what is it we can or will do?

The silences I am calling moral silences are silences produced by creating patterns of courage, generosity, love, kindness, gentleness, discipline, selfishness, fear, and blindness. The way that we punctuate our lives with virtue and vice, and the intervals at which we repeat those patterns; the habits we create that produce and then shift the melody or tune of our lives and thus convey the essence of what we are to those who are drawn to us and our music—these are the silences I find worth investigating. This is what links moral life to risk, particularity, attention, attentiveness, relationship, and response. Moral discourse of the type Dauenhauer described can be applied to moral life, but that is not what I find compelling. I am much more interested in seeing how we create patterns in our lives with goodness and beauty, and just as the notes and melodies and themes and rhythms of a musical composition are apparent because of the space and time between the notes, so too are the patterns we create with beauty and goodness in our moral lives evident only because of the silence surrounding them. Learning to sense the silence in

moral lives will then be akin to (but not identical with) learning to attend and appreciate the structural function of silence between the notes and beats of a musical composition.

### **Conclusions**

#### Silence is a Part of Moral Life

First, silence can be an expression of love, as shown in the interactions between Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay show love to one in their actions, in their words, and, importantly, in what they keep from saying to the other. They show love in their willingness to yield to one another, and their mutual yielding produces space between them that makes room for each of them to reflect and to reorient themselves. What we refuse, what we let ourselves let go of saying is as important for love and relationship as are the things we choose to say and do. The things we refuse to say, of course, tend to remain invisible in our “real” lives since we human actors do not have omniscient narrators letting others know what it is we are holding back.

Second, silence can also be the deliberate restraint that makes self-coincidence possible and makes responsibility satisfying and not burdensome. Mrs. Ramsay has a hard time putting her feelings into words and so refuses to do so. By remaining verbally silent about her feelings for her husband, she is able to remain most fully herself and to express her love for him with generosity and kindness. She feels the responsibility to convey her love to her husband and she takes that responsibility seriously: “Was there no crumb on his coat? Nothing she could do for him?”<sup>71</sup> By expressing her love in ways that

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71. Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 123.

also satisfy her need to resist the demand that she put her love in words, she is able to bear that responsibility as lightly as possible, without breaking under the weight of it.

Third, silence can be a neutral ground between vice and virtue that keeps one from slipping into vice during times of great trouble. Lou's habits of silence preserved her character until she was able to begin to see herself clearly and with kindness. Because she was so accustomed to silence and also to goodness, she kept from descending into vicious gossip, slander, and outright bitterness after Maytree left her. Her habits of silence provided her with the space necessary for the reflection required for the development of virtue.

Fourth, silence can be provide inner (mental, emotional) space from within which one can grow and create. Max Picard writes that "recreation cannot be realized without the silence, for man is unable wholly to free himself from all that is past unless he can place the silence between the past and the new."<sup>72</sup> Picard's image can be considered an alternative to Murdoch's "orientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source": both insist on the necessity of the break with the old that makes possible the new, and both insist upon placement-dependent imagery. Murdoch imagines turning around or turning away; Picard imagines stepping back to make room for silence to intervene. What is needed in order to create (or recreate) is space in which to move, and that space can be imagined as silence. Lou could not engage in moral creation until

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72. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Wichita, KS: Eight Day Press, 2002 [1948]), 70. See also Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952 [1947]), in particular, page 52: "Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality: only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear. Silence, as it is used in this context, does not mean 'dumbness' or 'noiselessness'; it means more nearly that the soul's power to 'answer' to the reality of the world is left undisturbed."



she re-oriented herself, until she intentionally placed her silence between her old habits and desires and what it is she came to be.

### Silence Contributes to Moral Growth

What I called the fourth way in which silence is a part of moral life also shows that silence can be linked with moral growth. First, when silence is taken up deliberately, as a chosen habit, it encourages self-reflection and assessment. Lou chooses to climb the Pilgrim Monument every day at first, and then when distressed afterward in order to carve out a space wherein silence could be a maieutic for clearly seeing herself and for rooting out vice. Lou lived in a form of silence much of her life, and particularly after Maytree left and her son grew up: she lived alone, was careful in her choice of friends, and spent a lot of time away from her home in town at her shack on the dunes. Still, Lou knew that this was not the kind of silent space from which to cultivate growth. Although Lou was quiet, rarely spoke, spent much of her time reading and painting, that kind of being quiet was insufficient for moral reflection. In order to make space for silent thought, assessment, and deep seeing, Lou seeks out a new space, one that takes her away from what is comfortable and familiar, away from distractions and from other people, where the only thing to do is to look out and to look within. Lou learns silence in the monument and not before. She is quiet, reticent, inscrutable before she begins her work in the monument; afterward she learns to transform herself through silence by stripping away the layers of sedimented, unreflective attachment to people and things and activities that shielded her from seeing herself clearly.

The ambiguity of silence covers nascent virtue and vice, and both can grow stronger in silence. Again, this is evident in the character of Lou. There was never a point

at which one could say of Lou (given what have in the novel) that she was anything but a decent person. Until Cornelius confronted her, however, she was not in the habit of looking at herself clearly and rigorously in order to strengthen what was virtuous and to weaken what was vicious. After Maytree left, Lou struggled to hold on to her natural cheerfulness, her natural willingness to think well of others. We only know she was unable to do so because of Cornelius's gentle rebuke. Her bitterness grew stronger in silence; her inability and unwillingness to notice what she thought and felt meant that the self-destructive, bitter, life-denying feelings that began to fester after her husband left her went unchecked. Without habits of inner moral self-surveillance Lou was not able to tell the effect of her murky feelings on her moral person. It may be the case that most of Lou's friends and acquaintances remained unaware of Lou's slip into bitterness because she was so reticent. Her quietness and the generous things she said out loud covered over the bitterness that grew below the radar of her conscious thought.

When Lou seeks a new space from which to look carefully at her inner self, she breaks with her habitual reticence and creates something new. On the surface, little seems to change—Lou rarely speaks both before and after she got the moral “tip” from Cornelius. Previously, Lou's scarce speech was fossilized inclination and habit that, while not morally blameworthy, was also not morally commendable. Morally speaking, Lou's reticence was fairly neutral. Lou elects to risk everything—even that characteristic reticence her family and friends would have called most basic to her nature—in order to see herself clearly and resist bitterness, and her unreflective habits of reticence become an inner space from which to evaluate impulses and emotions before they took root. Lou's limited speech becomes a moral art of silence.

### Silence is Constitutive of Art

Both of the novels discussed in this chapter rely on silence for their structural integrity. This was shown by attending to the shifting temporal rhythms in both novels and I appealed to narratologist Gérard Genette, phenomenologist Bernard Dauenhauer, and literary theorist Patricia Oudek Laurence for multidisciplinary perspectives on the relationship between rhythm, silence, and artistic structure. I posited narrative and discursive silences as the obverse of the narrative and discourse time identified by Genette, and this distinction between the silence of the particular unsaid and the unsayable that dissolves individuality resembles Laurence's tripartate division of silence. However, the distinction as I have described it may prove more helpful in understanding the way that we experience silence outside of encounters with art. This distinction will return in chapter four to give names to the two kinds of silence Sara Maitland experiences in her various experiments with silence.

### What Have We Done?

In this chapter I have described as faithfully as possible some of the silences created and held by characters in two novels. I have called these silences moral silences and tried to show that silence can point to moral choices one has made and that silence can be a medium for moral creation and moral growth. I have also related the fictional silences to philosophical explications and categorizations of silence in order to test each against the other.

In this chapter I have also linked fictional silences and narrative technique to artistic silences and the silence of artistic discourse as given by phenomenologist Bernard Dauenhauer. I have shown that the ethics of silence I am offering does not reveal the

silences that may or may not characterize moral discourse, and that the moral silences I am investigating do not fit well into Dauenhauer's category of the silence of moral discourse. Rather, I am examining the silences we produce in our moral lives. I claimed that the silences created in and by literary fiction parallel the silences we create in and through our own lives. I concluded by arguing that moral life is an art, and that the silences we create, hold, and respect are significantly like artistic silences in both form and function.

#### But This Is All Fiction

All the examples in this chapter have been fictional. Mrs. Ramsay, Lou, Mr. Ramsay, and Maytree are all fictional characters who have no real existence beyond the page and the imagination. Is it irresponsible of me to point to unreal persons as exemplars of silence? The short answer is no, it is not irresponsible. The narrative quality of the novels ties the characters and their depicted motivations and responses to our own world of messy life.

Monika Fludernik offers a composite definition of narrative comprising five distinguishing features. First, narrative conveys a representation of the world or of an imaginatively possible world. Second, it features human or otherwise anthropomorphic characters who are identifiable with themselves. Third, the characters are spatially and temporally located and/or locatable. Fourth, the characters may perform actions aimed at certain ends or may be acted upon. Fifth, in some way, narrative depicts events and relies upon a belief in causal relationships. Fludernik puts it more succinctly: "A narrative is a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially

anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-oriented actions (action and plot structure).”<sup>73</sup>

All the characters in the novels are represented as humans with human qualities, skills, limitations, desires, goals, motivations, and failings. We are meant to take them for people that could possibly exist—nothing in either novel gives us to believe that any of the characters is a non-human alien being with a greater-than-human capacity for attention or reflection. In that sense, these are realistic novels: they offer representations of the world as it is and as it can be seen to be instead of offering a world other than that which we generally experience.<sup>74</sup>

Because of the realistic qualities of the novels, we are able to say of the characters and their actions, “Yes, that is plausible.” There does not have to have been a real Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay for us as readers to acknowledge that it is indeed plausible for a long-married couple to have a very clear intuition about what the other thinks and to be able to respond to what is not said in meaningful ways. There does not have to have been a real Lou and Toby Maytree for us as readers to acknowledge the plausibility of Lou’s descent into bitterness, her desire to be generous and equanimous, and her inability to see either descent or desire clearly.

Because the novels, however realistic they could be, are also at the same time works of art, and so cut off from us (though we are not cut off from them), the novels are

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73. Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 6.

74. For example, if the world depicted had an extra moon; if it was governed by an audible god; if everyone were able to communicate telepathically—if there was anything that made either of these novels utopic, atopic, or dystopic, then we could argue that the world is human-like and intelligible, but not “realistic” in the sense I am trying to convey here.

a safe place for learning to see moral silence. I could give personal examples from my life, but that would be unfair to the people in my life, it would threaten the real silences I experience with others, and no one unconnected with me would have any reason to believe me, to trust my judgment and my interpretation. Perhaps my sister has been giving me the cold shoulder and I think she is hurt about something. That may be, but this is a philosophical enterprise, not a self-help forum or a session of talk therapy. Moreover, if I were to share my sister's silences with the world, I would harm the relationship I have with my sister.<sup>75</sup>

What is necessary for productive, intellectual engagement are silences we all can share without causing harm. This is why I rely so heavily on art. Art can facilitate an exploration of ethical silence because art, unlike silence, is sharable.<sup>76</sup> Moral rules and principles are also sharable, but they tend to be regulatory as well—Dauenhauer and Sissela Bok both rely upon the regulatory aspect of moral appraisal and moral reflection in their evaluation of secrets and silence.<sup>77</sup> Responses to art can indeed be better or

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75. For the record, my sister has not been giving me the cold shoulder, and there are no known silences to which I am referring here. I am not creating a preteritive silence, nor am I jeopardizing any confidence my sister has in me.

76. Of course we can “share” silences in the sense that we can have communal experiences of silence (as in a meeting of the Society of Friends, for example). However, even of such shared experiences, discussion risks breaking the silence that was shared. Keeping with the example of a meeting of Quakers, being led by divine light to speak during the meeting might respect and even deepen an experience of silence; talking with a fellow attendee of a particular meeting about all the things one thought or felt or imagined during the meeting and asking for similar details from others risks breaking the silence, even after the fact. Thanks to both John Lysaker and Iain Thompsen for pushing me on this at a conference at which I presented an abbreviated version of part of this chapter.

77. Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984).

worse, more or less faithful to the sense of the piece. However, artworks also invite multiple and varying perspectives, assessments, opinions, evaluations, and questions. The proliferation of perspectives does not harm the artwork and the lack of conformity of opinion does not damage appreciation for art. I began with novels so that we could learn to see moral silences without doing moral harm and so that we could begin to practice a kind of evaluatory investigation that does not depend upon conformity to a single, universal or universalizable opinion or belief.

The realistic and artistic qualities of the novels are thus a boon to my investigation. Still, one might wonder what would happen if the investigation were moved closer to what could be called “real life.” If the characters or situations were real in some way, what then? In the next chapter, we will find that out. In chapter four, I will examine two recent memoirs of silence, Anne LeClaire’s *Listening Below the Noise* and Sara Maitland’s *A Book of Silence*. The themes of solitude and time will come to the fore: LeClaire resists solitude in her habit of speechless Mondays and the pattern in her efforts to control silence can help reveal the risk involved in seeking and practicing silence. Maitland, who throws herself into solitude in order to test silence, shows us what happens to time in solitary silence. Dauenhauer claimed for silence a unique temporality; Max Picard claimed that time increases in silence.<sup>78</sup> Neither one of them, however, demonstrates what happens to time in silence. Maitland attempts to describe the way time changes in silence; I will relate the relationship between silence and time to moral life.

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78. Picard, *The World of Silence*, 18.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

In the desert,  
Turn toward emptiness,  
Fleeing the self.  
Stand alone,  
Ask no one's help,  
And your being will quiet,  
Free from the bondage of things.

—Mechtild of Magdeburg

In chapter three, I showed that literary art can convey and embody silences that mirror the silences that may be present in our own moral lives while also being themselves moral: art does not merely produce an image or reflection of real moral life or moral silence, art requires moral responses from the reader who must attend the patterns and pacing that produce the rhythms of the novel taken as whole. This attention is not only practice for attending to the rhythms of other people; this attention reveals the rhythmic nature of life, which can be best expressed artistically. Thus, art reveals stylistically the differing temporalities of moral life which are difficult to depict otherwise.

Chapter three also introduced time as constitutive of narrative and as related to the experience of silence: silence disrupts experiences of time/narrative and this offers an important clue when learning to see (or better to see) silence. Extreme shifts in temporality can signal a discursive silence that disrupts narrative progression. Alternately, smaller patterns of regular, rhythmic silence help to maintain a reliable sense



of time in a narrative so that in controlled, small, regular “doses,” silence is part of what makes narrative storytelling or narrative self-understanding possible.

This chapter will continue and expand discussions from the previous chapter on the relationship between time and silence. Both of the novels discussed in chapter three show dramatic variations in rhythm and speed and these exaggerations make the rhythms noticeable. By so falsifying the patterns and speeds of life, the novels also revealed something true about life otherwise nearly invisible: First, that our lives are suffused with repeated patterns that organize our lives on both micro and macro levels. That is, we create patterns of rhythm and melody day by day as well as decade by decade. Second, our perception of time and of its rhythms changes in certain seasons or around certain events in our lives. Now that the relationship of silence to time has been established with the acknowledgment of the role of silence in creating temporal rhythms, this chapter will delve deeper into particular ways that silence changes the way that time is experienced. Indeed, the recovery of silence as a part of moral life distinct from solitude will rest upon the difference between silence-time and solitude-time.

In this chapter, I introduce solitude and its relation to silence. In the last chapter I showed how literary fiction could convey silences in structure, rhythm, plot, and melody. One of the purposes of this chapter is to show that real lives, imagined as narratives, (can) also produce and preserve silence as well as create in and with silence. The increased reality the memoirs bring will lend increased moral credibility to my project. They also bring a new hurdle: I have not yet explored whether solitude is always required for silence or whether it is required only for some kinds or experiences of silence. If silence

is always attended by solitude, then might it not be the case that all the claims I have been making for silence have more (or everything) to do with solitude instead? Fortunately one of the memoirists under examination offers some clues for distinguishing between the effects of silence and solitude, even when they coincide.

Having explored the relationship of silence to both solitude and time, the chapter will conclude, thematically, with a discussion of silence and narrative and rule. As I will show, silence disrupts narrative even while it makes narrative possible. The corollary is that silence also disrupts rules. The disruptive nature of silence must be considered with regard to ethics: is ethics possible if silence is disruptive? Does the disruptive nature of silence support my claim that moral life has more in common with artistic creation than with organizing narratives and rules?

The narrative texts that will guide my study of solitude, time, and disruption will be two memoirs of silence, Anne LeClaire's *Listening Below the Noise* and Sara Maitland's *A Book of Silence*, and one memoir of solitude, Alice Koller's *The Stations of Solitude*. I will introduce each memoir and point out experiences of silence as well as salient stylistic features. Building on the previous chapter, wherein silence was claimed for a medium of moral art (or moral life), the silences offered up by the memoirists will be tested against the characteristics of intervening silence and artistic discourse: Are the silences the authors offer disruptive, risky, or creative? Do they reveal silence as plenitude? These four characteristics, identifiable in chapter three, but explicitly discussed here in this chapter, will test the accounts offered by LeClaire and Maitland. On the one hand, the silences in the memoirs are significantly tied to lived experience, and so if none of these four characteristics appear in their accounts, or if they are not

shown to be prominent features of the silence they experience and create, then we may consider whether the novels and the phenomenological study accurately convey what happens to non-fictional persons in silence. On the other hand, if these characteristics are present in the memoirs, then the claims I made in chapter three will be strengthened.

### ***Listening Below the Noise: Speechlessness and Silence***

More than twenty years before I started writing this chapter, novelist Anne LeClaire slipped to the beach on a difficult day for a bit of restoring calm and heard, above the rhythm of the waves, the words “Sit in silence. Sit in silence. Sit in silence.”<sup>1</sup> She considers the command and decides that for the following day she will refrain from speaking entirely. She tells her husband that evening that she intends to spend the next day in complete speechlessness. The next morning, a Monday, she wakes to hear her husband speak the words, “I love you.” She presses her hand to his in response and he then says, “I know you do.”

The rest of the day continues peacefully. LeClaire makes breakfast and finds that her intention to refrain from speech makes her morning rituals more mindful. She then enters her writing studio to begin the day’s work and is delighted to discover that writing flows more creatively and smoothly when she turns her entire attention to her work. The phone rings twice and she is happy to recall that her commitment to spending the day in speechlessness absolves her of any responsibility to answer the phone and respond to the person on the other end of the line. She writes more and writes longer than she does most days and, instead of feeling tired and creatively spent, she feels fresh and pleased. The

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1. Anne LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise: The Transformative Power of Silence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 9.

day is so pleasant, she resolves to repeat the experience two weeks hence. After the second day of silence ends, she decides to make every first and third Monday of the month a day of silence. The memoir is an account of the seventeen years that follow that decision.

When LeClaire received her call to silence, her children were young adults and had left the home of their upbringing. LeClaire herself was in her fiftieth year when she began her practice and she wrote her meditation on silence as she approached her seventieth year. Although silence came as a surprise during a morning walk along the beach while she worried about a friend whose mother was dying, unlike the experiences of silence described by Maitland and Koller, LeClaire's path to silence was relatively calm. It was simply an idea that came to her and, curious, she decided to follow it out. The resulting artistic creativity and moral development may have caused a few growing pains as she confronted parts of herself she preferred to ignore, but there is no crisis in LeClaire's memoir.

The narrative flow in LeClaire's memoir is largely linear. The book spans the seventeen years of her practice of speechless Mondays with the first Monday and the present day (at the time of writing) as the narrative poles of beginning and end. Throughout the narrative are interspersed little vignettes and stories from her childhood and early marriage, and their placement shows that these are designed to help illustrate a point she is making in the narrative of those seventeen years of silence. Speechless Mondays became a prominent rhythmic feature of her life, and below I will note how LeClaire changed and what she learned about silence. There is evidence throughout her

memoir for the presence of artistic silence in her practice. I will show that this evidence is revealed in surprising ways.

***A Book of Silence: Romantic Silence and Ascetic Silence***

Sara Maitland's memoir, published the year before LeClaire's memoir, offers a different kind of perspective on experiences and practices of silence. Although Maitland writes that she is prone to hearing voices, her "call" to silence was both less dramatic and more painful than LeClaire's Augustine-like conversion. LeClaire heard a voice telling her to "sit in silence," so she did, and found that silence disrupted the settled patterns of her life and opened her up to new ways of relating to her self, her work, and to her family and friends. Maitland's movement toward silence is nearly a mirror image: Maitland's family patterns shifted and, almost as a side effect, Maitland discovered silence as she rebuilt a life from the remaining pieces of her broken rhythms and patterns.

In the middle of her life, Maitland faced the gradual end of her marriage. When she and her husband separated, she took a cottage in a village outside London, where she and her husband had been living. Her daughter had already left home and her son came to live with her for his last year before moving on to college. Away from the city, and living in greater solitude, Maitland became aware, as she had not previously been, of silence.

For Maitland, silence and solitude are so closely connected that she cannot have one without the other, though she knows that there are many who can be silent in the company of others and many who can be solitary and also quite noisy.<sup>2</sup> As Maitland gained more solitary time, she found herself immersed in silence. This so interested her

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2. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010 [2008]), 16–17.

that she sought out ways to learn specifically about silence: One of her first immersion-studies took her to Skye where she lived in a remote cottage for forty days and nights. Not long after, a winter storm kept her housebound and isolated for a few days. A friend gave her the opportunity to try a sensory-deprivation chamber for two hours. There was an excursion to the desert and one to the forest. Last, she created a walking retreat for herself on an out-of-the-way swath of moorland.

While seeking out different ways of seeking and living in silence, Maitland also read many accounts of silence and solitude, and that research structures the chapters in her memoir. She becomes increasingly interested in practicing silence and her growing interest fuels her study of the kinds of silence other people experienced. Her research generally splits into two kinds of silence: adventurous, romantic silence and religious, ascetic silence. These two kinds of silence have quite different effects, and Maitland got to experience some of each of these. Adventurous, romantic silence, when it goes well, can distill the self. In this category we find those explorers who seek out “extreme” geography—the harshest of deserts; the poles; the highest of mountains; the middle of the ocean. Solitary expeditions to such challenging terrains yield experiences of the sublime very like that sought by post-Enlightenment Romantic artists. Religious, ascetic silence, on the other hand, tends to dissolve the self. Here, too, there can be extreme geography—the Desert Fathers and Mothers practiced solitary apophatic Christian devotion alone in the desert; later “green” martyrs in tiny coracles flung themselves into the sea with hopes

of landing somewhere isolated and hospitable to a meager, solitary life.<sup>3</sup> Ascetic silence destroys and is meant to destroy a certain kind of narrative. It breaks down ego boundaries in order to silence the self before a god or ideal that cannot be contained in language.

### **Silence and Narrative**

#### Risk

Early on, LeClaire develops rules for her practice of silence. First, and most obviously, she restricts her practice to two Mondays every month. Silence becomes a regular pattern in her life but only at widely spaced intervals; between each silent Monday there are always two full weeks during which she does not have to think about practicing silence. She marks off the speechless Mondays on her calendar in advance. This alerts her family at home to their approach and it removes from her the burden of choice—once marked, she does not have to anticipate or worry over ideal scheduling (Will a day of silence fit here? Would it be better here?). She schedules the silence and then fits her life around it. The silence, which is rigidly scheduled, disrupts the flow of her life in regular, predictable, and widely-spaced waves.

LeClaire's careful scheduling of silence can show us more about the risk involved in disrupting regular patterns and making new ones. LeClaire's attempts to contain silence follow a format recognizable from decision theory and risk assessment and management practices: because we are not cognitively equipped to process

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3. "Red martyrdoms" were those in which the martyr gave his or her life for faith. Those who left everything and everyone behind to seek a life-long, solitary hermitage, by contrast, sought "green martyrdoms." Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 169.

thoroughgoing and radical uncertainty, humans have a tendency to reinterpret ambiguity and uncertainty as probability; sometimes we then even transform those probabilistic interpretations into beliefs, as when Mr. Ramsay said without any doubt that it would rain on the following day.<sup>4</sup> The acts of reinterpretation that minimize uncertainty in order to maximize feelings of competence and security are as much a part of silence as they are of theories of risk.

LeClaire reduces the scope of disruptive silence in a similar fashion, in the hope that she can balance the benefits of silence with the risks it brings. Even before she begins her first speechless day, and before she gains any experiential evidence of the disruptive nature of silence, LeClaire restricts her attempt: she informs her husband the night before her first silent Monday, breaking silence about her silence, in order to minimize the disruption. Sharing with her husband her intention to forgo speech signals LeClaire's desire to increase the intelligibility of her choice. The next morning, when she does not verbally respond to her husband, her husband is not confused by her muteness; he understands her refusal to respond as part of her stated intention to refrain from speaking.

All of LeClaire's subsequent rules work in the same way. By sharing her intention to refrain from speech, LeClaire hopes to make her desire for silence intelligible to others. She carries a notecard saying "I am having a day of silence" so that strangers she encounters on the speechless Mondays will be able to interpret her muteness as

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4. Sven Ove Hansson, "Philosophical Perspectives on Risk," Keynote address at the conference *Research in Ethics and Engineering* (Delft University of Technology, April 25, 2002), 4–5. Available online: <http://home.abo.kth.se/~soh/PhilPerspRisk-text.pdf>



something other than aloof rudeness. She marks the days on the calendar so that her family will be able to see that a silent Monday is coming up well in advance. Her communication and schedule both work to minimize the risk of misinterpretation and misunderstanding: she's not being perversely anti-social, she's just having a day of silence.

In my previous chapter I discussed two novels that portrayed, to varying extents, the risks involved in silence (and communication, generally) in interpersonal relationships. The Ramsays are fortunate: Mr. Ramsay is able to interpret Mrs. Ramsay's actions as expressions of love, and the silent communication works. The Maytrees are less fortunate: Toby Maytree stops interpreting Lou's silence as expressive in any way. He recasts Lou's reticence as emptiness and so releases himself from his committed love for her. Both women are silent (though in different ways); the effect of silence on their marriages is quite different. Put bluntly (though amusingly), "Risks are inextricably connected with interpersonal relationships."<sup>5</sup>

Although LeClaire attempts to minimize the risk by sharing her intentions and explaining her practice, she is unable to eliminate risk entirely; her attempts to control silence reveal her tacit acknowledgment of the risks that accompany the cultivation of silence. As I noted above, LeClaire's introduction of a pattern of speechlessness disrupts the other patterns and relationships in her life. Introducing a new pattern—of any kind—will change the appearance and interpretation of other patterns. I am probably belaboring the obvious at this point; so be it. No matter how intelligible LeClaire attempts to make

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5. Sven Ove Hansson, "Philosophical Perspectives on Risk,"<sup>25</sup>.

her new practice, there are still consequences and she is not fully in control of those consequences. It is of course the case that for any action we take or any pattern we create that we will not be able to predict or control all of the consequences that follow no matter how careful we are in our attempts to understand, explain, and contain them.<sup>6</sup>

For silence and for patterns of silence, however, the risks may feel heavier because it is necessarily invisible and ineffable, and this makes attempts at risk-management more difficult than it might be in situations where there is observable, recordable data that permit more objectivity. An ethics of silence will share much with an ethics of secrecy. Sissela Bok, in her ethics of secrecy, notes the risky nature of concealment: “Secrecy about plans and their execution, therefore, allows unpredictability and surprise. These are often feared.”<sup>7</sup> This does not condemn all forms or expressions of secrecy any more than the risks of all kinds of silence or the existence of harmful silence and silencing condemns all forms of silence. Bok clarifies this when she writes about secrets “not in themselves linked with evil, but necessary, rather, to preserve something precious—love, friendship, even life itself—and sometimes endowed with the power to transform those who approach.”<sup>8</sup> Even these necessary, good-preserving secrets are risky. The risk involved with silence does not taint the goodness that may be found in or created with silence. It does mean that silence will always be susceptible of multiple and often

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6. For a helpful overview of an ethics of risk, see J. E. J. Altham, “Ethics of Risk,” (Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held in London on Monday, 24 October 1983).

7. Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Vintage, 1984), 23.

8. Bok, *Secrets*, 4.

conflicting interpretations; that it will be easy to get silence “wrong”—to practice it inelegantly and to interpret it wrongly; that the effects of silence will be as hard or harder to predict as silence itself is to see or hear.

LeClaire does not write about the risks of silence in a general sense, but her instinct to manage it from the beginning with rules and limits helps to reveal what it is that makes silence risky; contrasting LeClaire’s rules with Maitland’s immersion reveals still more. LeClaire places limits on her practice so that it will be regular and easy to follow, but also to minimize the disruptive effect it was certain to have on her family and closest friends; by limiting her practice of speechlessness, she could maintain her closest relationships and still carve inner space for herself—her relationships with others would be explicitly altered only two or three days out of every thirty, which is really quite manageable. LeClaire worries about the effect her silence might have and does have on others: she feels a pull when she declines invitations and celebrations on days that fall on a silent Monday; when, some years into her practice, she begins to crave more solitude, she worries that her desire is revelatory about some fault line in her marriage—what if she wants more, and then more, and then runs away? Her friends assure her this will not be the case and she relaxes, but as much as LeClaire enjoys, anticipates, and learns from her Mondays, she also worries about their effects on her relational self. Her rules—which have been quite rigid for at least seventeen years and probably more than two decades if she has been continuing the practice since the publication of her book—are quite rigid and that rigidity enables her to relax into her version of silence while remaining in her hometown, in her house, and in the company of family and friends.

Maitland, however, imposed no rules on silence as she came to desire more knowledge and experience of silence, and so silence changed her life much more dramatically than it did LeClaire's. Put differently, Maitland risked more in her quest for silence. She devised no restrictions on her practice of silence, instead following the path that opened up to her as she learned more about what silence is and does. She moved house twice; traveled to the desert, the forest, and to an island; and devised a long walking tour in solitude. The ways in which Maitland restructured her life were unintelligible to many of her friends and Maitland, unlike LeClaire, does not write of any anxiety undergone in the attempt to justify or explain her decisions to others. She notices both her friends' bemusement and her own increasing lack of ease when immersed in social life for too long. Maitland accepts these changes as part of the terms of living a life devoted to and structured by silence. As a result, Maitland's life changes radically. LeClaire, recall, remains firmly in place in the same life—house, town, family, community, career—she brought with her on her first silent Monday. Her life has become enriched by silence but not radically altered. Maitland, on the other hand, leaves her life entirely: she moves from London to live in a hermitage on a solitary moor by the sea in Galloway; her marriage falls apart; her friends learn to keep a new kind of distance; and her career and identity as a writer changes as she envisions writing new kinds of stories:

If, and I think it is true, silence really does produce the effects I was investigating in *Skye*, especially the collapse of time and space—those boundary confusions—that is not going to be too good for prose fiction, which utterly depends on specific times and place. Plot (the idea that things happen in an orderly pulse of cause and effect) just doesn't work any more. Narrative doesn't drive anything forward in the silent vacuum. Perhaps, although silence has no narrative, it does

have a rhythm. That would be an interesting idea because it would align silence with *music*.<sup>9</sup>

Maitland's experience of silence led her to conclude what Dauenhauer could only conjecture about silence, rhythm, and music.

LeClaire's rules and routine serve to minimize the risk she took in pursuing silence. The result was that although silence changed her life, it did not disrupt it significantly. For Maitland, on the other hand, silence was both enormously risky and enormously disruptive. Silence altered completely the narrative of her life and it made clear to her the fault lines she had been sensing in narrative fiction. At the beginning of her journey into silence, Maitland had "reached a point where I no longer had the simple confidence in narrative, in storytelling, which had sustained a steady flow of work for over twenty years....I did not feel that my imagination had 'dried up' or that I was being silenced by a writer's block, but rather that there was something *more*."<sup>10</sup> Diving into silence taught her more about the contours of her doubt regarding narrative storytelling and rather than resent the disruption, Maitland grew into it.

### Disruption

LeClaire has much to say about the way her practice of keeping from speaking disrupted her routines and habits as well as her relationships. She writes that her "silence occasionally broke the settled rhythms of family life."<sup>11</sup> Her husband admitted that there

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9. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 284; italics in the original. Compare with Virginia Woolf's stated difficulty with plot noted in the previous chapter: "though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction, and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw the reader." (Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, 181).

10. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 32; italics in the original.

11. LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise*, 75.

were times he found her practice “a pain in the ass,” that he would “get irritated when the rental agents call, or our bank, or accountant. Or when we need to make a decision about something and you can’t talk.”<sup>12</sup> Her daughter missed the spontaneity of conversations as a result of the speechless Mondays and her son found family dinners uncomfortable when she sat with the family and did not speak. She did not attend social events on those Mondays; picnics, holidays, her daughter’s birthday—if they fell on a first or third Monday, they were cancelled or postponed.<sup>13</sup>

Silence disrupts her habits, revealing sedimented patterns of behavior and creating space from which to choose to do something other than what was usual. LeClaire, who is otherwise a chatty, gregarious woman, given to finishing other peoples’ sentences, interrupting other people without thinking, and offering unsolicited advice, found that she learned to be a better listener when she forced herself to keep from speaking: “in stillness, I could hear in my mind the echo of the words I would have said if I had been speaking and so was able to observe my habitual responses and behaviors.” By denying herself the privilege of speech at regular intervals, LeClaire learned to listen more attentively to those around her and also to herself.<sup>14</sup>

Maitland does not report similar disruption of habits and patterns of behavior, but this is likely attributable to the fact that she did not decide to seek or practice silence and then change her life. Maitland’s life changed first and those changes, silence became

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12. LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise*, 36; 76.

13. *Ibid.*, 186.

14. *Ibid.*, 107; 14.

noticeable and desirable. Disruption and silence are still linked. The two memoirs provide a nice contrast in this regard: Cultivating a new habit—whether silence or anything else—will disrupt old ones. When long-held habits and patterns fall away, that disruption can be a vantage point from which to learn to desire new things that were previously unnoticed and unvalued. However, this shows that the introduction of *any* new habit or pattern will be disruptive in some way; it does not (yet) show whether there is something particularly disruptive about silence.

Recall from chapter three what Dauenhauer wrote about rhythmic function of intervening silence. The pulse of silence between “beats” of non-silence (musical, discursive, etc.) gives structure to the performance. Refraining from speech at chosen regular intervals not only revealed to LeClaire many of the patterns of behavior and relationship and response of which her life was made; regular, dependable days of silence created a pattern of speechlessness in the second part of her life. Silence became a recurring and intentional practice and changed (or added to) the rhythm of her life. The rhythm of silence fostered a pattern of reflection: just when the insights she gained on every silent Monday began to fade or feel stale, she faced another silent Monday where she could relearn the discipline of reflection, yielding, and waiting.

For LeClaire, silence provided inner space from which to listen more carefully to herself, but it also disturbed her sense of herself. “Intentional silence was serving as a yellow light in my path, halting my stride, leading me to recognize matters shoved beneath the rug. And forcing me to acknowledge that I was out of right relationship with

my world.”<sup>15</sup> Without conversation to diffuse the attention she had available for herself (let alone for others), LeClaire finds it harder to hide from her “complexities and contradictions,” and because she learns to see them more clearly, she begins to learn from them in order to grow more compassionate, calm, and creative.

### **Disruption of Time**

Both Maitland and LeClaire write about the way silence disrupted their experiences of time. LeClaire mostly notes the expanding of time that takes place in silence. Her thoughts move at a slower pace and the slower pace she feels herself to be taking helps her to see and let go of habitual behaviors. Silence provides time and space to defuse what would have become a quarrel with her husband if she had not kept herself from speaking. The stillness that accompanied silence slowed her down so she could pay closer attention to those around her, even while surrounded by others. Last, silence practiced in solitude slowed her down.<sup>16</sup>

Other times, she calls the disruption in experienced time elastic: while at on a writing retreat in an artists’ colony, she notes “In the opulent luxury of solitude, time becomes elastic and creative impulses surface and are allowed room to breathe.” While on her own retreat at her family’s summer house, “Again, I noticed how in silence, time often seemed elastic.”<sup>17</sup> While alone and intending silence, time feels stretchier. I am not sure whether LeClaire intends the distinction between expansion and elasticity, but it is

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15. LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise*, 45.

16. *Ibid.*, 18; 77; 101; 107; 177.

17. *Ibid.*, 137; 156.



worthy of note. Silence can make time feel longer, as it did when LeClaire felt that everything slowed down. Silence can also make time appear both to expand and contract, to be stretchy. Silence is elastic in the moments when she loses herself in a moment of silence and finds herself suddenly snapped back to the present.

Occasionally, LeClaire notices that silence can make time fly rapidly. On her third speechless Monday, LeClaire woke feeling internally clamorous and ill-prepared for a day of silence. She wanted to let go of the new practice she had developed. Instead of shedding it altogether, she bargains with herself: she will stay quiet until noon and then, if she still need the break, she would make plans with a friend. She entered her writing studio, got to work, and then was shocked to look up and find that her noon marker had come and gone, that time had flown in silent work.

Maitland writes more about the experience of time in silence than does LeClaire, and her observations about time and silence are very closely tied to linearity, chronology, narrative, and plot. One of the very first things that Maitland noticed about silence during her six weeks alone on Skye was that the experience of time passing fell apart. During her time on the island, she kept rather strict rules regarding what counted as silence. She reserved her telephone strictly for emergencies. She forwent a watch and hid the clock. There was no television in the cottage, no computer and no email, and her only soundtrack was the wind through the rocky terrain. For her, “the clear, if artificial, demarcations of passing times were among the first to break down under the ‘pressure’ of silence....I found it harder and harder to maintain a sense of time passing.”<sup>18</sup>

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18. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 66.

Maitland's deep immersion into silence and solitude may have led her to experience what positive psychologists call "flow," one of the characteristics of which is "a distortion of temporal experience."<sup>19</sup> This is the common sensation that one has lost track of time. The obligations that most of us have keep us from "losing" time for very long stretches at a time—our jobs, families, friends, hobbies, communities tend to prevent us from having the time to lose track of time very frequently or for very long. In solitary isolation, however, without the proxy connection of various forms of electronic communication, and without the distraction of multi-media entertainment as a multi-sensory metronome beating out a frenzied tempo, the experience of silence as flow can change the way that passing time is experienced.

#### Silence Resists Narrative and Narrative Reveals Silence

The rhythmic function of silence as noted by Dauenhauer in his phenomenological study of silence suggests that silence is or may be constitutive of the pacing and structure of an artwork; this can be as true of literary art as of musical art. Maitland complicates this thought in her assessment of the effects of silence on narrative fiction, which I quoted above. On the one hand, Maitland, like Dauenhauer, claims that silence does have a rhythm. She also describes plot as "the idea that things happen in an orderly pulse of cause and effect." So the rhythmic function holds for both silence and for the structure of a piece of narrative fiction. But Maitland also finds that one of the effects of silence is to destabilize, even "collapse," to use Maitland's word, time and space, and that this has a

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19. Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Flow Theory and Research." in *Handbook of Positive Psychology* eds. C. R. Snyder Erik Wright, and Shane J. Lopez, 195–206 (Oxford University Press, 2001). The other components of flow also appear to fit the experience Maitland describes.

destructive effect on prose fiction—how can one tell a particular story when the (fictional) “data” of particularity melt away? Maitland had an intuition that there was a different kind of writing that she could do, and that she could learn to do it in silence. This kind of writing would not be in the “fragmented, psychologically realist” style so popular for contemporary fiction, but would be something more extreme.

Silence resists narrative fictional storytelling and it also resists narrative understanding of lived events. Maitland experiences this during her time on Skye and she writes that she found the same experience of ineffability in other accounts of silence. She writes that “silence itself seems to have a quality of being indescribable, literally unsayable. There is obviously not much I can say about this! The difficulty seems to have caught almost every silence seeker by the neck. ‘I can’t explain or describe it’ is probably the most usual comment—whether the speaker goes on to try to do so or thus evades the effort.”<sup>20</sup>

Silence, Maitland contends, threatens the boundary between inner and outer, self and not-self, and this changes the way that reality is experienced and makes narrative accounting for time spent difficult or nearly impossible. She recounts one of several episodes during her stay on Skye wherein she lost the ability to distinguish clearly events taking place in her mind and those taking place in the world we all share. The episode she shares is quite detailed: during a windy, howling rain storm, she heard a vehicle approach her house and watched first from the windows and then from the door as a van with a peculiar large dent arrived and stopped. A terrier rounded up four sheep and then a

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20. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 74.

scruffy shepherd in a blue woolen hat looked at her and said, “I was looking for a stray.” As she walked back into the house, the shepherd and his dog drove away. A few minutes after she closed the door, she wondered whether that actually happened or if she imagined or hallucinated it; at the time of writing, she still was not sure.<sup>21</sup> In this case, there is time and place: The order of the events accords perfectly with normal experience—the sound of the van driving up the track preceded the van and not the reverse; the man and dog got into the car before they drove off. The setting is appropriate—Maitland did not stand from her doorway on a Scottish island ten or fifteen years ago and see a biblical shepherd in a middle-eastern setting; neither did she see an antique, romantic highlander type. Nothing about the events is significantly unusual so as to prove that the scene was imagined. This event can indeed be told as a little story; on its own it stands as something significantly narrative in quality. The problem is that in the narrative of Maitland’s life, it is not clear to her whether this actually happened. In what way is this part of her life story, her life told as a narrative? Whether or not something actually happened is important evidence when we construct our life histories—I may have a detailed, lucid, extremely realistic vision of having received my doctoral degree, but that will not enable me to tell people I earned the degree in fact.

Of other intense moments of silence, however, there is no narrative that can be constructed after the fact. Maitland again: “The experience of those intense moments of silence—when the external and the interior silence come together and the subject becomes conscious of that, without thereby breaking it up—is not just difficult to talk

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21. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 69.

about; it is actually very hard to recall, remember, to reconstruct emotionally. It can even be somehow contentless or meaningless—outwith language.”<sup>22</sup> Silence disrupts, challenges, even falsifies narrative by making it difficult to distinguish between kinds of reality (the things we imagine are *real* imaginations but they are not real in the sense of events that can be confirmed, counted upon, referred to by others, etc.). It challenges narrative still further by creating holes therein that cannot be filled in any way.

In my previous chapter I wrote about a class of silences in art where there exists ambiguity, questions, and potential but absent details, and I said that those are silences that cannot be “filled in”—there is no research or excavation that can reveal definitively whether Mrs. Ramsay had in fact had a lover before Mr. Ramsay. In lives, this is not typically the case. The internet and private investigators can be consulted; official records unearthed; email correspondences tapped and recorded. In lives, however, the silences that trample the sense of inner and outer so that the subject has an ineffable, unsayable experience remain unfilled and unfillable, pricking a person’s self-narrative with little pin-holes of silence that dot the fabric of her life as lived.

Certainly one well-written memoir crafted by an accomplished author is not the definitive statement regarding silence and narrative. Consider some examples from narrative bioethics, such as Rita Charon’s observations about time and modernist fiction. Charon writes about the indubitable importance of time and narration for self-understanding generally; her specific aim is to show how important patients’ stories ought to be for the medical professionals who encounter them at narrational crossroads.

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22. Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 74.

Throughout, she is at pains to tie narrative understanding with temporal existence (which is not unusual, of course). She offers a paragraph outlining the shifting temporal frames that structure many novels, and then defends the novelists against charges of meaningless experimenting: “The novelists adopt methods from life. One does not make meaning chronologically.... We learn who we are backwards and forwards, early memories taking on sense only in the light of far later occurrences and contemporary situations interpretable only in the web of time.”<sup>23</sup> Charon thus acknowledges that, though lives are lived in a linear fashion, meaning and understanding occur in directions more webbed and spiral than straight.

Charon’s is a good point, but this acknowledgment will not be enough to address what Maitland finds in silence. Insisting on the ubiquity of narrativity like Charon does (or seems to in this article) will lead one to privilege the “stuff” of narrative and to overlook what falls out of narrative. In an article about the inner activity performed by patients and invisible to medical professionals, John D. Lantos also invokes Woolf and other modernist writers. He writes that

Action in the twentieth-century novel is not necessarily what happens out there in the world. It can equally well be what happens internally; the mythic psychic struggles of Freudian psychoanalysis or the rhythmical lyrical inner monologues of a novel by Virginia Woolf or James Joyce both suggest a way of thinking about action that might apply to a character who is not “doing” anything at all. Such narratives can be tense with suspense and drama, though there is little “plot” and, in many cases, nothing really “happens.”<sup>24</sup>

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23. Rita Charon, “Time and Ethics,” in *Stories Matter: The Role of Narrative in Medical Ethics* ed. Rita Charon and Martha Montello (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

24. John D. Lantos, “Reconsidering Action: Day-to-Day Ethics in the Work of Medicine” in *Stories Matter*, 156.

Charon writes that “no act stands outside of temporal relation with what came before or will next occur”<sup>25</sup> and she is not wrong to say this. What Lantos writes about the absence of visible plot and the importance of inner, internal activity shows where Charon may miss an important part of ethical life (which would hold not just in medical ethics but also for “healthy cases”). There is no doubt that everything that Maitland experienced while on Skye happened in time, and that time moved around her in just the same way that it moves around everyone else—all her minutes were a mere sixty seconds no matter how long or short they felt or whether she could remember them at all. This is true for LeClaire and for anyone else who has experienced different qualities of time. But it is also true that Maitland experienced transformative moments in solitary silence that she still cannot put into language. Experiences that resist language resist narrative. The lacunae in her life that resist narrative can be considered acts that are preceded and followed by other acts that may stand as markers across which to stretch threads of life-plot. When the silences are significant, the gaps may be more telling than the outer, visible, describable, sharable acts. Maitland wants to live her life in the gaps where silence and all its unsayability lives, and this means constructing a life where, as far as plot goes, not much happens. In the article cited above, Lantos shows that the invisible inner life can be richly active. In the next chapters, I will lean on Iris Murdoch to develop that point further.

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25. Charon, “Time and Ethics,” 60.

***The Stations of Solitude: A Philosopher's Hermitage***

In 1962 Alice Koller had held a doctoral degree in philosophy from Harvard for nearly two years and still found herself working minimally-skilled short-term jobs, falling in and out of unsatisfying relationships, and unable to see a clear path toward something better. She had the sense that if she could just get away by herself and be without distraction, she could figure out what to do. To that end, she rented a cottage on Nantucket for three months and thought her way through to reality. Koller wrote about her time on Nantucket and this became her first popular book, *An Unknown Woman*.<sup>26</sup> I will save most of the discussion of this first memoir for chapter six. There are a few things about this first memoir that bear mentioning now.

First, Koller's break with her life followed a different pattern than either LeClaire's or Maitland's: Koller was thirty-seven years old and single when she escaped to Nantucket. LeClaire and Maitland were married with nearly-grown children. They were remaking (and unmaking) their marriages while learning to live with more time and space than they had had when their children were small and required more attention. Both LeClaire and Maitland were well-established in their careers of choice; neither LeClaire nor Maitland give any indication that they worried about or experienced poverty. Koller, on the other hand, was not quite at the same perimenopausal stage of her life; she had no husband, no children. Koller writes about the unsatisfying, dead-end jobs that were a poor

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26. Alice Koller, *An Unknown Woman* (New York: Bantam, 1981). Koller finished the manuscript in 1967 and sent it out more than thirty times over the next fourteen years. Although it was published just ten years before her second memoir, *The Stations of Solitude* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1991), by the time the second memoir was published, Koller had spent nearly three decades living alone.



substitute for a satisfying career in which she might achieve financial solvency. Though LeClaire and Maitland arrived at silence from quite different directions, they did have in common both the timing of their turn to silence and sufficient security in which to practice it.

Second, Koller's decision to seek solitude functioned as a break, as a serious disruption, from the life she had been living. LeClaire's unprecedented (for her) decision to sit in silence did change her life: she became a better listener, a better writer; she learned to let go of ego in ways she might not otherwise have done.<sup>27</sup> LeClaire punctuated her life with little breaks that created new patterns for reflection and for action. Maitland, on the other hand, found her life disrupted for her whether she willed it or not. As a result of the disruption, she discovered silence. The ruptures in Maitland's life were significantly more dramatic than were LeClaire's and they were less pleasant—Maitland had much less control than did LeClaire over the fact of the disruption. Like LeClaire, Koller initiated the break from her established habits and practices. But like Maitland, the rupture initiated something unpredictably life-altering. Koller felt herself to have little choice. Not for reasons like Maitland's—no one else pushed Koller to change

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27. I am thinking specifically of the birthday party at the Iowa Writers Workshop that fell on one of her silent Mondays. She felt rejected and isolated watching the others celebrate the birthday. She used her speechlessness to reflect on her feelings and the others' celebration and came to let go of much of her sense of woundedness—they were not rejecting *her* in any way; they were not even avoiding her, really. This relinquishment of ego recalls the inner moral work Lou did in the Pilgrim Monument in *The Maytrees* discussed in chapter three. I will return to it in chapter six and link Lou's work with the letting go of ego Iris Murdoch talks about in "On 'God' and 'Good'": Murdoch thinks this is required for really moral action and in chapter six, I claim that the work of letting go of the self-preference or self-obsession hiding in the concept "ego" is work that is best done in silence.

her life. Instead, the imperative came from within: either she would find some new way to live or she would stop living.

Third, Koller has a doctoral degree in philosophy. While alone in her cottage, she reminded herself that she was well trained and highly qualified to ask questions and to refine those questions; she reminded herself that her professional training taught her to seek truth and to look for methods wherever she can find them. She reminded herself that she passed exams and won high marks for looking attentively at problems and for analyzing claims. So reminded, she used her philosophical training in order to understand herself and to see whether there was going to be some way of living that could benefit her. She learned and unlearned a great deal. (Her time away might be cast as a kind of existential-Cartesian project.) By the end of it, there are only a few things about herself she trusted to be true: “Logos was of my heart. I had to live near the sea or other wildness. I possessed a passion and perfect eye for color.”<sup>28</sup> This was sufficient for a beginning. Strengthened by her certainty in those three things, Koller proceeded to build a life that honored and grew from those self-truths. That life proved to be quite solitary.

### **Silence and Solitude**

#### Solitude

I have mentioned several features that may be constitutive or revealing of silence: risk, plenitude, creation, disruption. Much, much more study is required before I can say that these things are constitutive of silence as such and are not part of the solitude that tends to accompany silence. A cursory glance at some of the philosophy of solitude reveals that

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28. Alice Koller, *The Stations of Solitude* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990), 8. Logos was the puppy she brought with her to Nantucket to keep her safe.

all these have been accorded to solitude, and to solitude whether or not it is silent (though, on my definitions, much of it seems to be significantly silent). Solitude, like silence, has been called risky by its detractors. Solitude, without mention of silence, is credited with sparking and fueling creation. Even that quality I was so convinced, following Maitland, had to do with silence specifically—the shifting experience of time—has been claimed for solitude.<sup>29</sup>

And yet. It does seem plausible that solitude, in and out of silence, could disrupt the experience of time. This is the elasticity that attends the experience of “flow,” for example. This has less to do with silence or solitude narrowly defined, and more to do with the state of being utterly absorbed by an activity that creates a functional isolation—one grows less aware of and responsive to other people who may be around; and also an experience of inner silence (at least)—the chatter in one’s mind quiets so that the ego boundaries are suspended and external sensory data grows muted. This seems as attributable to solitude as to silence; alternately, this experience of flow might be interpreted as a kind of solitude or silence (or both) depending upon the preference of the one so immersed.

Moreover, as Maitland observed, it can indeed be difficult to separate silence and solitude. She has a difficult time separating them because she requires solitude for the practice of silence; when other people are around, she finds it very difficult to avoid attending to them and the interaction that follows breaks her silence. Maitland does note that there are or may be people who do seem to be able to be silent while among others—

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29. Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1994).

someone like the fictional characters discussed in chapter three, for example, a Lou Maytree or a Mrs. Ramsay. She also notes that solitude need not be silent, and this point deserves explication. Solitude, of varying kinds, plays a large role in both the memoirs discussed above. As Maitland found her days unpeopled, she found greater time and opportunity for silence. For LeClaire, whose familial arrangements are different, solitude has been a smaller part of her practice of silence. While her husband is away at work, she spends her silent days in significant solitude. She also writes that the longer her pattern of speechlessness extended, the more she craved solitude to accompany her silence.

There are accounts of solitude that are much less silent, and these deserve some mention in order to distinguish between solitude and silence themselves and the different effects each might have. Since I began this project, I have wondered, while reading Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, why there seems to be so little mention of silence in her account of the year she spent alone in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Dillard, like Emerson and Thoreau before her, does not appear to find it difficult to communicate her solitary experiences in nature. She does not find, with Maitland, a dissolution of narrative unity in her writing or in her sense of self. Or consider the lives of others famed for their solitude: Koch writes of the correspondence they maintained to show that removing oneself from the physical presence of others does not bring with it necessarily any loss of connection: "Rilke complained about how people pestered him in his solitude, about the letters he felt compelled to write—112 in a few short months! Georgia O'Keefe and

Alfred Stieglitz wrote each other almost every day during Georgia's solitary summers.

Emily Dickinson wrote 1,045 letters by the time she was fifty-six."<sup>30</sup>

This brief detour into solitude will help me to make use of the two kinds of silence that Maitland talks about: There is the ascetic, ego-dissolving silence of the desert and the Romantic, ego-distilling silence of the mountains. This second silence might be more strongly correlated with solitude; of this silence, the distinction between silence and solitude is unclear. This is the silence that finds expression in Romantic poetry and gothic fiction; this is the silence that restores the artist to him or herself so that she can recover from the needs of others and from the mundane and re-see the artistic vision that fuels creation.

Communicative solitudes do appear to be strongly marked by creativity.<sup>31</sup> This corresponds to what Maitland writes about "Romantic" silence: although it is certainly possible to create in society and with external stimulation, there is nevertheless a traditional relationship between withdrawing from society and creating against a background of silence. I use the word "creation" here broadly. Had Dickinson written only the letters (none of the poems), the letter-writing would be sufficient as an act of creation. This kind of solitude-silence, following Maitland, may be restorative.

Withdrawing from the hurried rhythms of conventional middle-class (by which I mean the class that is wealthy enough to be able to afford breaks from working but

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30. Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*, 138.

31. I will have to forgo a study that might demonstrate this with the thoroughness it deserves. Consider the artists mentioned above and many more that could and ought to be mentioned. An easy online search for "artists" + "silence" will reveal hundreds of quotations from writers praising the silence that makes creation possible.

insufficiently wealthy to give up working altogether) life and its various commitments in order to attend to the desires and demands of the self in spite of the noisy opinions of others can indeed renew creativity. This is the kind of periodic withdrawal that solidifies the sense of self. This solidification depends on a prior belief in an essential self that is diluted by encounters with others. The artist retreats into a solitude that incorporates some elements of silence in order to clear away that which inhibits access to the essential font of creativity. (Pardon the skepticism here.) At bottom, then, the solitude-silence of creative retreat is one that binds the self more strongly into a role or character. Indeed, this kind of self-solidifying retreat is clearly related to theories about the narrative unity of human lives and especially about the desirability of that narrative unity.

However, the disruption of narrative that happens in silence owes primarily to the silence and not to solitude, certainly not to solitude as a self-reviving retreat from the world of commerce and community. The second kind of silence Maitland describes, the ego-dissolving silence, can, I think, be distinguished from solitude (even though it might more frequently take place in solitude than does Romantic silence). I mention again the frequency of reports that the experience of time changes. In this case, however, the changes in time and the reports thereof are different. LeClaire, fighting against her rule of silence one morning made a bargain with herself: she would write until noon and then, if she still found silence too difficult, she would permit herself to stop and make plans with a friend. She entered her writing studio, got to work, and then was surprised and delighted to find out her noon goal had come and gone without her notice—time had flown so swiftly that she hardly felt its passing. She gives this as an example of the

elasticity of time in silence, a sensation confirmed by other solitaries in strong narrative reports.

Compare LeClaire's experience with some that Maitland gives: Maitland found that hours had passed and that, looking back, she has no idea what happened in them. There is nothing to give a record of that time and there are no memories to help her out. Time ran out, ran away, stopped; there is no account, no memory, no narrative for that time that had passed. LeClaire's happy workday is an example of time when experienced in "flow"—she was so immersed in her work that she quieted her inner thoughts and her awareness of her surroundings and so found the work of creation easy and pleasurable. Moreover, at the end of it, she had a product—her writing—to show for the time that zipped by in solitude. Maitland's inexplicable loss of time is a product of the kind of silence that breaks down self and makes narrative impossible, not least because there is nothing to show for it when time picks up again. Maitland's experience of silence is negative in an apophatic sense: there is nothing substantive she can say or to which she can point at the end of an experience of silent silence. This kind of silence, again, does tend to take place in solitude—Maitland was indeed alone when her most ineffable experiences of silence took place. However, the kinds of extreme temporal disruption such as that experienced by Maitland appear to be heavily grouped in two areas: unchosen or inescapable silence that leads to madness and the chosen silence of the ascetic.

## Invisible Silence

**“The tree with the lights in it”**

Consider again Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. A few pages earlier I mentioned my confused response to Dillard’s account of her solitary time in Virginia: why was Dillard able to write so strongly and assuredly about her time alone? Having attended to the language and effects of silence as well as to explorations of solitude, I now suggest that the silence in many solitary accounts is quite invisible. There is more silence in those solitudes than the authors tend to recognize.

Dillard explains her purpose, method, and style (at least in part) early on in *Pilgrim*. First, “I am an explorer, then, and I am also a stalker, or the instrument of the hunt itself.” The image she then invokes is a bloody one. She likens herself to an arrow used for hunting, specifically, a grooved arrow used for particularly difficult prey. If the arrow lands but does not kill, the grooves will channel the streaming blood so that the hunter can track the wounded animal. Dillard writes “I am the arrow shaft, carved along my length by unexpected lights and gashes from the very sky, and this book is the straying trail of blood.”<sup>32</sup> Dillard means for the reader to follow the trail formed by the book toward—what? What is the prey? Reality itself, perhaps. True perception. Clear seeing.

Next, Dillard discusses her habit of representing reality to herself in order to attend to it. “Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won’t see it....I have to say the words, describe what I am seeing....I have to maintain in my head a

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32. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2007), 14.



running description of the present.”<sup>33</sup> The internal running narrative that Dillard produces is what becomes much of what the reader (later) sees on the page. She tells herself what it is she has seen and what it is that what she has seen can or might mean, and then she writes it down, reflects and writes some more, and the result is the “straying trail of blood” that teaches us, too, how to see, how to track what it is we have seen and learned to notice.

“But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I sway transfixed and emptied. . . . When I see this second way I am above all an unscrupulous observer.”<sup>34</sup> This second way of seeing is not recordable. Dillard compares the first way of seeing to walking with a camera and the second way to walking without a camera. The first way of seeing, described in the paragraph above, produces little snapshots of sharable reality. Look! See! I saw this and here is the evidence; I saw this and preserved it so you can see it, too! The second way of seeing produces results less obviously sharable. Dillard’s language—always beautiful—shifts from baroque detail to a poetic abstract, “When I walk without a camera, my own shutter opens, and the moment’s light prints on my own silver gut.”<sup>35</sup>

The second way of seeing leaves the reader behind; there is no bloody trail made of concrete detail and narrative connection. The reader sees Dillard transformed into a seer gone off into a trance, or perhaps a religious recluse lost in prayer: whatever it is that

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33. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 33.

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

happens is happening on the inside and though we can know that something is happening, it defies language. She writes further, “When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses. I am the man who watches the baseball game in silence in an empty stadium. I see the game purely; I’m abstracted and dazed.”<sup>36</sup> There is invisible silence in Dillard’s account of her time at Tinker Creek. What is set down and then fashioned in such a way so as to present it to a reader is a record of all the things she noticed herself noticing; all the things she attended herself attending. By keeping her sense of self strong and distinct, she captured intricately detailed moments, moods, and experiences that are part of an accurate and true tale of the time she spent living in that cabin. What drops out of the tale are the times and places where, having lost that distinct sense of self, she glimpsed something un- or less-mediated by ego, expectation, habit.

Some of those moments do make it back into the tale. In the chapter called “Seeing,” Dillard writes about blind people whose sight was restored when cataract surgery was made safe and available. (I mean restored in a wide sense of the term—the people about whom Dillard wrote had never learned to see before the surgery.) She notes that some people learned to see with relative ease and that others—even some quite young—had great difficulty learning to make sense of color, depth perception, shadow, and light. Many talked about the great beauty of the visual world and Dillard is particularly taken with one girl’s description of “the tree with the lights in it.” What kind of tree can she mean? At the end of the “Seeing” chapter, Dillard shares something she has seen. “Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and

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36. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 34.

I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost changed and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame.”<sup>37</sup> When Dillard first saw the tree with the lights in it, she was not thinking of anything, not taking mental snapshots of the scenery, not willing herself to attend to the things around her. She had let go of the strong inner self that stands apart and intentionally sees things for the purpose of having seen them fully and she was stunned by the vision of a tree made wholly of light. She tells the reader of the experience as best she can, but the telling is much like Maitland’s attempt to tell the times when silence obliterated time: both sound abstract and poetic; like parables or some other kind of symbolic story.

Dillard’s telling of her experience of seeing the tree with the lights in it is not like a snapshot of reality or drop of blood from the arrow about which she can say Look! See what it is I saw! The tree with the lights in it is something that cannot be captured in a snapshot; something that happens between drops of visible blood on the trail. The reader can learn that there are things that can be seen and ways of seeing that might happen when one lets go of the conscious activity of noticing but remains nevertheless and somehow open to seeing. An openness that does not reserve anything “behind” that is aware of being open. But this openness cannot be taught, and it is difficult to express without sounding like an obscure sage. In this unreserved openness, Dillard had an ineffable experience that she put into language as best as she could. Experiences like this are the trace of the silence that Dillard encountered during her solitary time at Tinker Creek.

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37. Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, 36.

Dillard's vision of the tree with the lights in it is not exactly a moral silence. Still, it can point us more strongly toward what moral silences are, and it can strengthen the distinction I am at pains to make in this chapter between silence and solitude. For the average person who has not been blind, seeing the tree and the grass below it as flame and wholly fire requires the willingness to break—fully, if temporarily—with every habitual way of seeing. It requires the willingness to let go of habitual and reasoned interpretation. It also requires the willingness to see creatively, to believe the extraordinary testimony of the capricious senses. This kind of an attitude is undoubtedly risky: we rely upon our careful, rational mediations of external appearances in order to trust our sanity. What might it mean for someone who is quite sober and who is neither seeking nor experiencing any kind of religious ecstasy to see an ordinary cedar tree as a blaze of leaping tongues of fire? Dillard risks looking (let alone feeling) mad when she dares to describe the vision as she saw it. This kind of risk, however, parallels, or is like, or may even be a part of moral self-creation, which will be the focus of chapters five and six. Moral growth is not a merely organic process. Unlike physical growth, which happens to us, which happens beyond our direct control, moral growth requires intentional creation, and is in this way both like artistic creation and also fraught with risk.

Recall Lily Briscoe from chapter three's discussion of *To the Lighthouse*. Lily was the artist trying to capture the tune of Mrs. Ramsay. She painted her vision as she saw it and no amount of fad or fashion in painterly circles, no amount of hissing disdain from Charles Tansley, no amount even of confusion or misunderstanding from her dear friend William Bankes could persuade her that she saw otherwise than she did. By the

end of the novel, Lily succeeded (much like Mrs. Ramsay, at the end of part one, succeeded in conveying her love for her husband to him without using the traditional, habitual words “I love you”): she was able to paint the vision she had of Mrs. Ramsay at the window in such a way that she was satisfied with the fidelity of the effort. She expressed something intensely personal and that expression is represented by something creative (that is, that she *created*) and tangible.

Moral self-creation will not yield such obvious tangible results as a painting in a picture. However, all the novels and memoirs discussed so far offer clues for understanding it. These things are required: a personal experience of a clear vision of something real; the willingness to see without ego, and so to experience that vision and that reality in an unusual way; the courage or ability to trust that the vision is real; the transformation of one’s life as a result. Furthermore, moral self-creation will share with Lily’s painting and the tree with the lights in it the ineffability of the experience; silence is not required so much as it is the only thing to do. If Lily could have spoken her thoughts about Mrs. Ramsay or about the vision she painted, she would not have needed to paint. Her inability to express in language what she felt and saw moved her to paint the vision instead. Neither could Annie Dillard have taken a picture of the cedar tree and proved the experience of the consuming flames—the flames had everything to do with a way of egoless seeing that coincided with tree and light. Tree and light would have made it into the photograph, but one cannot photograph the (temporary) relinquishment of ego. Instead, Dillard writes about it just after describing her method, and it may be that her hope is that others who care to do so will be able to have their own similar vision one day

when, while thinking of nothing at all, they chance upon some lovely coincidence of leaf and light and forgetting of self.

### **Silence vs. Solitude**

The silence of ineffability surrounding Dillard's experience of the tree with the lights in it is a dramatic example of silence "silenced" by or invisible in accounts of solitude.<sup>38</sup> Less literary explorations of solitude bear traces of a similar silence. The index for Philip Koch's 1994 book, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* has only two entries for silence, and it even combines "silence, quiet, stillness" into one index entry (silence does not even get its own entry). By my count, silence is invoked more than thirty-six times in the book—and this is a generous count that omits several cited passages that refer to or mention silence. Koch notes that, regarding silence, "writings on solitude reveal a considerable elasticity of usage." He continues, "'silent' conveys to me the absence of all sound, human or otherwise; it seems natural to say that the silence was *broken* by the sudden rustling of the wind in the leaves or by the cry of a bird."<sup>39</sup> In contrast to his idea of what silence is, Koch refers the reader to Alice Koller, who considers her solitary life to be quite full of and characterized by silence, and to Sioux writer Charles Alexander Eastman, who wrote of silence as a way of life.<sup>40</sup>

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38. I should note that *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is not explicitly a memoir about solitude. However, John D. Barbour includes it in what he calls an American tradition of nature writing in *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 132. Moreover, Dillard is solitary during that year.

39. Philip Koch, *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1994), 20.

40. Philip Koch, *Solitude*, 20.

I refer the reader back to the second chapter of this dissertation for a more thorough discussion of what silence indicates, and of the ways that experiences of silence change over time. What is noteworthy here is that Koch displays a lack of awareness of the richness of silence itself as a phenomenon, experience, attitude, and choice. This weakens his attempts to discuss a connection or relationship between silence and solitude. When I introduced this section on solitude, I wrote that what I and others have claimed for silence has also been claimed for solitude, namely riskiness, changes in time perception, creativity, and expansion of sense of self. Without a thorough study of both silence and solitude—an examination of silence without solitude; solitude without silence; and solitary silence—it may be that neither silence nor solitude will be fully understood. This dissertation will not be that study. Still, an awareness of the work done on solitude is still a significant step.

Absent the study suggested, there are still several distinctions between silence and solitude that can be outlined and that will keep this investigation on track. First, although it may not be clear whether it is the silence or the solitude that so changes the perception of time as noted by Maitland and LeClaire in this study and many others elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> it remains the case that all these examples combine silence (to some extent) with solitude. The experience of shifting time while solitary tends to be accompanied by silence even when that silence is not explicitly acknowledged. None of the examples given (and I will grant that this remains a collection of anecdotal evidence) describe a solitary experience

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41. Maitland devotes several lengthy discussions to solitary explorers who lost the sense of time; Koch points to passages in Thoreau's *Walden*, May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*, and several other memoirs.

of altered time-perception while a company of airplanes roar overhead, or while the noise from a nearby music festival or amusement park carries to the place of solitude. In fact, both Anne LeClaire and Thomas Merton write explicitly about the unwelcome disruption of such sounds; construction noise was sufficiently disturbing for Merton that he felt his solitude destroyed while it continued.<sup>42</sup> Recall from the previous chapter Bernard Dauenhauer's phenomenological investigation of silence. Silence has a rhythmic and melodic function that creates patterns with time, and this takes place in art as well as in our lives. A hermit like Merton, who seeks a great deal more silence than society, will experience the pattern in reverse fashion: noise will disturb the silence and create patterns as well. When the longer rhythms of silence are punctured by the unavoidable interference of noise, then the momentum of the longer time in silent-solitude is broken and the hermit is brought back to clock-time again. The cultivation and experience of silence might be a more fundamental requirement for an experience of solitude than is generally acknowledged.

Second, it may be easier to have silence without solitude than to have solitude without silence. Solitude is not something that can be experienced in a moment; it requires a time investment. Maitland modeled her retreat to Skye after religious patterns and stayed for forty days and nights. LeClaire's first taste of solitude came during the week she spent at her family's summer cottage. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote *A Gift from the Sea* during her yearly solitary summer retreat. Koller does not grow in solitude

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42. John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography*, 173–4. See also Prochnik, *In Pursuit of Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 2010); Sim, *A Manifesto for Silence* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, Ltd., 2007)



until after she leaves Nantucket—though much of each part of every day was spent alone with her dog, the daily trips into town for the mail, for supplies, or for a diversion helped ensure that any solitude she experienced at that time was only a taste of what was to come.

The time requirement is not something I want to push too far. On the one hand, Merton was convinced that “‘real solitude’ (a phrase that recurs many times in his last years) had become impossible for him at Gesthemani.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the solitude of the Desert Mothers and Fathers need not be reconsidered or disputed in light of the evidence of the visitors they received in their hermitages. The investment of time required for solitude might vary from person to person; it might vary culturally and historically; it might even shift according to situation. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to cultivate, experience, and preserve silence moment by moment and it is not possible to do so with solitude.

Third, an ethics of the things we do not say has everything to do with silence and very little to do with solitude. This is as true for the ethical value of the things we keep from saying as it is for the self-creation and moral growth that resists saying. Consider the examples from the novels discussed in chapter three: the moral worth of Mrs. Ramsay’s silence and of Lou’s silence is unconnected to solitude. All the things Mrs. Ramsay did not say were not-said while in company and it is the withholding of such things that could have been said from others and at the time when they could so easily have been said that gives the not-saying its moral character. Consider, for example, Mr.

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43. John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, 173.

and Mrs. Ramsay's walk before dinner in the first part of *To the Lighthouse*. There are things that both Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay consider saying, almost say, and then refrain from saying, such as the bill for the greenhouse roof and Mr. Ramsay's declining career. What matters, morally speaking, is that each of them had ample opportunity for saying the things they held back, and that they held back for the sake of the other person.

This kind of refraining from saying is not something that can be done in solitude. I suppose one might withdraw from all society in order to preclude all possibility for saying a wounding thing, but that is not an appealing nor a plausible option for most people. Moreover, such a withdrawal—for such reasons—could only be an attempt to circumvent real moral growth. If there are no people toward whom one must behave well in order to avoid moral censure simply because one has withdrawn from the whole world, then it might be that other people miss having been hurt by the one who has withdrawn. Still, such a hermit would also miss any chance at being morally good. If I never have a dog, I can never fail by neglecting the dog, but this will not make me a good dog-owner.<sup>44</sup>

This kind of refraining from saying is something that requires, for goodness, the risk of being able to say the thing one does not say. To modify the implausible

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44. This is sounding a bit too much as though I am suggesting that solitary persons cannot be moral, or that periods of solitude are a withdrawal from morality. This is not the case, and I hope that the following chapter will do still more than does this footnote to make that quite clear. In this example, I mean only the ethical value(s) in not saying something. The (hypothetical) person who has withdrawn from society so that he or she will never fail morally by saying a morally censurable thing has no one to whom to say things and so avoids the whole situation under discussion and also will not have achieved something morally that is of the same kind as the achievement of the Ramsays. This hypothetical person and condition is, of course, a bit outlandish.

hypothetical condition from the previous paragraph, Mrs. Ramsay could have avoided seeing her husband alone if she wanted to be sure to keep the bill for the greenhouse roof to herself. She could have kept her son between them during the day, the dinner party with its long table and many members between them in the evening, and then gone to bed early to prevent there being an opportunity for speaking to him alone and then blurting out the value of the bill. Both these things, and this is my point, are a substitute for the silent moral strength necessary to keep something to oneself. Just as courage is tested, strengthened, and made evident by being courageous; and as honesty is tested, strengthened, and made evident by being honest; so too is keeping oneself from saying something in the wrong way and at the wrong time tested, and strengthened by actually keeping oneself from saying the thing that is better to not say.<sup>45</sup>

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45. The imperfectly parallel construction should make it clear that I am not treating silence as a virtue. Silence is not a virtue, and so it does not work quite like bravery, honesty, generosity, and the like. Rather, I would contend that silence is part of practical wisdom—it is part of why and how the virtuous person knows to say something or commit an action in the right way, the right time—all the “right” parts are where the silent silently lives. This is why silence, unlike courage or honesty above, is not made “evident” in the not saying: if the silence were evident, it would not be silent.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SILENCE AND MORAL SELF-CREATION

I have just learned to see praying mantis egg cases. Suddenly, I see them everywhere...

—Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Let us once again review what has been claimed by the previous chapters: First, silence, by its very nature, can be quite difficult to notice, and the more apparent the silence, the less silent it is. Novelist Anne LeClaire's speechless Mondays, for all they share with silence, fail spectacularly with regard to silence about silence; this makes her speechlessness relatively "noisy." By comparison, philosopher-memoirist Alice Koller's deliberate paralipses are much quieter. She writes about solitude openly and throughout her account of solitude she interweaves several prominent silences about which she says little or nothing.<sup>1</sup>

Second, silence is often difficult to interpret and it is often difficult to control. As chapter two shows, silence is not a purely physical phenomenon and the production and interpretation of silence is heavily dependent on socio-historical context. This means that silence can be "lost," as in the case of Odysseus's refusal to eat Circe's food as discussed in chapter two of this project; it also means that as ideas of silence change, we may be

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1. Koller's paralipses are fascinating (if a little frustrating): she refers casually to events and situations that she never explains. For example, she apparently has a nickname, "Timmie." This nickname is never explained (and it is not obvious; her given name is "Alice"), so the reader may be forgiven for wondering, when it first comes up, who this "Timmie" is. Both her books are full of similar obvious omissions.

able to notice patterns not visible to earlier audiences. Thus, the attribution of silence is as fluid as the practice and interpretation of silence. The fact that most twenty-first century readers will not associate a refusal to eat food offered by one's host as muteness or silence does not diminish the silence that can be found for those who are aware of the cultural understandings of classical Greece, it merely shows that the poet's careful construction of a silence perfectly intelligible for an ancient audience is not timeless. This is one example of how the construction and interpretation of silence is not (perfectly) controllable. On the other hand, contemporary audiences may interpret passages as instances of silence the ancients might not recognize. This too shows the elusive character of silence.

Calling some act or another "silence" is also not a pernicious cooption of someone else's experience. Becoming aware of silence is just becoming aware of one possible way to interpret patterns of behavior and silence will rarely be the only morally salient feature of the patterns interpreted. Moreover, if I become aware of holes, gaps, ruptures, or absences as I read a text or observe some other person, silence can be an organizing category by means of which I can reflect upon and appropriately respect other peoples' silences. But reflecting upon silence in this way is not the same as applying a label to other people without their consent. Becoming aware of the limits to what I can know or understand about someone else can be a way of holding a morally admirable ignorance that makes it possible for others to maintain their own secrets and privacy.

Thus, silence is linked not just to gaps in knowledge, but also to refusals of knowledge. Epistemological silences are among the morally beautiful silences in *To the*

*Lighthouse*—both Mr. Ramsay and Mrs. Ramsay permit one another to be, at the very bottom, inscrutable, at least sometimes. They know one another very well, so well that even when they hold back some of the things they would say or share, some of what is unvoiced is still understood. But both are also able to see the other as someone radically distinct and into whose every thought they cannot penetrate; out of love for the other, each refuses to disturb that secret inner person they glimpse but cannot know.

Third, it is much more difficult to write silence than it is to write about silence.<sup>2</sup> Extant ethical and phenomenological explications of silence are indeed helpful for understanding what silence is, intellectually speaking. They are less helpful in showing what particular ordinary lived silences can look like and how they function. For this, I turned to novels that depicted plausible interpersonal interactions that would have been unremarkable had they not been conveyed in such remarkable prose. Artistic forms of writing are better able to convey silences and to preserve the silences they convey because they are permitted much more variety in authorial voice and, obviously but no less importantly, they are permitted to be fictional, to depict what might be or have been. Fictional writing can express a character's intimate thoughts to the reader without breaking the silence between characters. This is of course impossible in real life.

Fourth, silence and solitude have several features in common, and though this does complicate the study of either silence or solitude, the overlap in features also helps one to see with greater clarity that which is not shared between them, as in a Venn

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2. Is that an ugly way of putting it? I could try “to write with silence,” or “to write in a way that preserves and also conveys silence,” or “to write in order intentionally to invoke silence”—I am not convinced that any of these are more elegant; I mean by this to write in such a way that the writing itself, not the conditions for writing, is suffused with silence.

diagram. A brief look at solitude in chapter four helped to refine the present study, which is specifically about silence as part of moral life. Future work on silence might fruitfully combine silence and solitude. Since the two do not tend to be well distinguished from one another, my efforts to show just what silence can do and mean apart from the contributions made by solitude is itself a distinguishing feature of this current study. Better yet, having made the attempt to distinguish silence from solitude (or some kinds of silence from solitude), I am better able to see and describe what remains: silence as a disruption or temporary destruction of narrative and silence as refraining from verbal expression.

The work of this chapter and of the next is this: to relate all that I have learned about silence, as expressed in the previous chapters, to philosophical ethics specifically and directly. Here I will argue that the disruption of patterns of behavior and of narrative and the withholding of verbal expression are part of the process of moral growth. What does moral growth look like? How can it take place? How does one move from natural virtue to moral virtue, from an inclination toward goodness to goodness itself? These questions have been with me for some time; until recently I did not see them as strongly related to my investigation of silence. This might have something to do with the fact that moral philosophy suffers from a kind of aphasia with regard to moral growth. By claiming silence for moral philosophy, I have come to see a related hole in moral philosophy where the conditions for moral growth ought to be discussed. The overwhelming tendency is to see moral growth, development, and transformation as something children do or as something required under the special circumstances that

require an “applied” ethics such as business or medicine (and also education; philosophy of education, applied ethics, and moral psychology all have much to say about the moral development of children). There is not, so far as I have been able to find, an applied ethics for all the rest of us who desire to become morally better than we already are, and certainly not for those who actually do become better. In normative philosophy, the pickings are similarly slim.

Susan Stark, for example, draws on Kant and Aristotle to outline two required steps in moral transformation: there must first be a cognitive change by which the moral agent comes to better understand what it is that virtue requires; this cognitive transformation must be followed by a change in affect.<sup>3</sup> She goes on to explain that “mere mechanical habituation” will not produce virtue; the novice moral agent must come to learn first that responses of type X are part of what it means to be, for example, courageous or to practice courage and also to cognitively understand the relationship between the actions or system of actions and the virtue to which they are attached. This is the cognitive transformation and, though it will produce endorsable action, it will not itself be sufficient for virtue. For the achievement of virtue, “the student must come to love justice (or virtue).”<sup>4</sup>

Between the cognitive understanding of what virtue requires and the love that transforms correct action into virtue lies a chasm that she has not bridged. Stark offers reason after well-cited reason for the value of emotions in the development of virtue. The

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3. Susan Stark, “A Change of Heart: Moral Emotions, Transformation, and Moral Virtue” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2004): 33; 40.

4. Stark, “A Change of Heart,” 41.



problem is that she offers the novice no path to follow in cultivating either moral emotions or love for virtue. One presumes that the only moral advice she could offer is this: If there is no pleasure, no emotion, no love, then you have not yet completed the first step of the transformation. Keep working at the cognitive stage and after you have really and truly finished your work there, then you will experience the change of heart that transforms correct action into virtuous action. What the change of heart (affective transformation) looks like, what it requires, how it can happen, how we can achieve it—all these are lost to the chasm she does not describe.<sup>5</sup>

In this chasm is silence. There is the silence covering that which Stark does not explain and that propels the moral novice from transformation one to transformation two (by which I mean that Stark does not acknowledge the chasm she overleaps). There is also silence—the moral silence I have been encircling in this project—in the chasm she does not describe. My claim can be restated: the act/art of moral transformation takes place in silence. Silence can be a part of the attention that makes possible the clear perception that must accompany the habituation that leads to the cognitive transformation. Emotions can be found, formed, and can grow in silence. And silence

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5. Cf. Robert N. Johnson, *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics* (New York: Oxford, 2011). In this book, Johnson argues that a Kantian ethics can support and even endorse self-improvement as an imperfect duty to oneself. He even considers the difference between moral improvement and everything else that is not, strictly speaking, required for moral achievement or improvement—things like strengthening one’s musical ability or becoming a better public speaker. As a work of philosophical ethics that takes the question of self-improvement seriously, Johnson’s book is quite welcome. In his essay, however, he restricts himself to showing that a Kantian ethic can support improvement. This does not tell us what that work looks like. I suppose if the desired improvement is better piano-playing, then improvement looks like hours spent pounding the keys. Where that improvement is moral (broadly or narrowly construed), what is it that moral change looks like? What happens philosophically? How can we develop a philosophical endorsement of projects for moral growth? How can we do this without straying toward pop psychology and dubious “self-help”?

accompanies the disruption of old patterns of thought and action required for the development of new patterns of being. In silence, attention deepens and perception widens and a break from or the breaking apart of the self that did not love virtue makes possible the self that does love virtue. In this chapter, I examine the destruction and restoration of self that is both characteristic of silence and an accurate description of the work of moral self-creation.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Enkratic, or the Self-Controlled Person<sup>7</sup>**

To will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same action.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*

Simone de Beauvoir's insistence upon the equivalence of freedom and morality in *Ethics of Ambiguity* illuminates both Lou's moral activity after having gotten the tip from Cornelius and Alice Koller's moral activity during her winter on Nantucket. After her

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6. Alexander Nehamas's *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) is devoted to philosophically motivated projects of self-creation. He makes a strong and welcome case for a long-standing tradition within philosophy devoted to the art of living, the fashioning of a self, and the care of that self. He shows—convincingly, I think—that the philosophers he discuss really do fashion an original self. What he cannot do is show exactly how that happens. He appeals implicitly to silence in this: “Montaigne produced a self, a work of the art of living, but neither he nor we can articulate how he accomplished his task” (*The Art of Living*, 127). For Nehamas, the inability to spell out how Montaigne fashioned his own self points to the fundamentally individual nature of such projects; no formula can be given because each person must make his or her own formula for him or herself. (One is reminded of Kafka's parable, “Before the Law.”)

My project does indeed overlap with Nehamas's in many ways, then. We differ in priority and focus: Nehamas's central concern is the fashioning of the self as part of the art of living; my central concern is the role and experience of silence as part of moral life. Nehamas finds that part of the process of self-fashioning is unsayable; I suggest silence might be a necessary part of some kinds of moral growth or self-creation. Nehamas is, moreover, less explicitly concerned with moral value than I am.

7. Currently I am using “enkratic” and “self-controlled” interchangeably and I am alternating (roughly) the terms. Any distinction that may appear to be drawn between the two terms is a fault of my understanding and writing, not an indication that I think the two terms are to be contrasted.

husband betrayed her, Lou remained trapped in regrets, desires, fantasies, and past relationships that fed her imperfectly hidden bitterness. The inner work she did at the top of Pilgrim Monument freed her from those patterns of bitterness; that inner work was moral work and it made possible a morally better (more admirable; more excellent) life. Because of her inner moral work, Lou became a more resilient person, one able to care for the people who had betrayed her decades earlier. Lou, of course, is a fictional character, so consider next philosopher Alice Koller, whose life and writings will be examined in greater detail in the following chapter: Koller wrenched herself from her self-destructive habits and patterns and taught herself to let go of everything that was not the case in order to see more clearly what was true and what could become true. The work (effort, process) that freed her from her habitual patterns of relating to others and of thinking about the professional and personal aspects of her life functioned as the beginning of a task of self-creation that I call ethical. Learning to see clearly, which requires letting go of fantasy and other distortions of attention, is a necessary step for an excellent answer to the question “How shall I live?”<sup>8</sup>

Beauvoir expands a bit on the relationship between freedom and morality when she writes “To will oneself free is to effect the transition from nature to morality by establishing a genuine freedom on the original upsurge of our existence.”<sup>9</sup> This fits well with Kantian and Aristotelian claims about natural virtue and virtue.<sup>10</sup> Some people are

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8. Here I appeal to Iris Murdoch’s essays on morality in *The Sovereignty of Good* which will be cited and discussed in the following pages.

9. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (Citadel Press, 1976), 25.

inclined, as though by nature, to be honest or cheerful or generous. These natural inclinations, however, do not count as virtue in the robust sense that Aristotle develops in the *Nicomachean Ethics* for reasons that Kant can help to explain (though we will not go so far as Kant does regarding desire and pleasure):<sup>11</sup> the problem is not that we cannot *know* whether or not the generosity is performed for the right reasons—it is not a problem of knowledge—but that it is neither tested nor trustworthy and that it is not chosen and willed deliberately and for itself.

Lou was naturally reticent and naturally a decent person. There is nothing in her behavior for us to reproach (at least on the evidence we have; and the narrator encourages us to view Lou in this way).<sup>12</sup> It makes so much sense to us as readers that a person in Lou's situation might be shocked after her partner betrayed her; any good women's magazine or self-help book would encourage her to feel all the feelings and be gentle with herself, not push herself too hard, trust that she will heal in her own time. Cornelius

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10. In Book VI of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle contrasts natural virtue with full virtue, indicating with the term “natural” an un- or pre-developed characteristic disposition to act in ways that are generally in accordance with a corresponding virtue. These “natural virtues” are not themselves virtues; they may predispose the bearer toward the full achievement of the related virtues, but without the development of practical wisdom, the traits will not be considered virtues. This distinction is made at 1144b2–18.

11. In the first section of the *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* [trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983; reprint 1994)], Kant makes a similar distinction between an untutored inclination to do admirable things and the good will that motivates the morally good person to do what is right regardless of inclination.

12. The narrator/narration encourages such a view by depicting or representing only admirable behaviors and by refusing to depict or represent those that might have revealed any bitterness or self-pity to the reader. The totality of the narration *including the silences* reveals a well-behaved, admirable—if pitiable—Lou. I can see this relating well to Nietzsche's perspectivism, at least as discussed by Alexander Nehamas in *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1985): Cornelius's reproach reveals that he has an experience of Lou that we, the readers, do not share. Neither Cornelius nor the reader is wrong; both experiences of Lou are “right”

does not offer pop psychology; instead he holds up a mirror to Lou in which she can see her own bitterness. Lou sees it and chooses to begin the work of willing herself free—free of attachment to her husband, free of bitterness, free of self-preference, free of narcissism and solipsism. In so doing, she begins to will herself moral.

In Aristotelian terms, she develops a stable disposition of self-reflection and of non-possessive love. Later, when Maytree and Deary return, Lou is able to draw on twenty years' worth of practicing silence and relinquishment for virtuous reasons and cares for Deary and Maytree with compassion and even with joy. The largely invisible inner work she did in Pilgrim Monument produces visible, virtuous results twenty years later. In this way, the depiction of Lou's life is a depiction of, among other things, moral growth.

The terms “moral change,” “moral development,” “moral self-creation,” and “moral transformation” are as good and as accurate as “moral growth.” This is the subject of this and the following chapters of my investigation into silence: the figure of the enkratic person in Aristotelian ethics is my starting point for a discussion of what moral transformation looks like and how it can occur. These chapters are devoted, in all their sub-arguments and examples, to showing that silence is closely tied to moral transformation. The silence of transformation begins with the silence that must be a part of truly enkratic behavior.

The enkratic person “does what is tactful, brave, or beneficent, but does not have the right feelings about it, whereas the virtuous person does.”<sup>13</sup> The primary difference

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13. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 67.

between the virtuous person and the merely self-controlled, or enkratic, lies in the difference of feeling between the two kinds of moral agent. The enkratic does just what is right but does not find doing what is right pleasant and desirable. She does not pursue virtue for virtue's sake, but rather for the sake of avoiding vice and of preserving the self. From the outside, however, the virtuous and the enkratic should not look very different, generally speaking.

If the self-controlled person is truly controlled, her behavior must be so like that of the virtuous person so as to be nearly indistinguishable. Julia Annas writes that “the direction of the virtuous life is less obvious from external observation and may be clear only when we can take into account the person's reasons and feelings as well as his actions (something which almost none of us is in a position to do).”<sup>14</sup> Thus, part of self-control must, it seems, involve not whining, complaining, eye-rolling, or otherwise acting in ways that undermine the self-control and correct behavior: if you stick your neck out for a friend and also complain and hedge and sigh and sneer, then you cannot really be mistaken for one who is brave. If you have just enough self-control to not run away but not enough self-control to stand ground or risk exposure with grace and composure, then you have not developed sufficient self-control for the achievement of enkrasia. This kind of resolute self control ought to be interpreted as a kind of silence: it is because of the enkratic moral agent's well-disciplined silence regarding her imperfect virtue that she can pass as virtuous.

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14. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 117.

Annas's parenthetical note deserves attention as well. Almost none of us is in a position to know, let alone evaluate, someone else's reasons and feelings. This means that almost none of us is in a position to know whether or not any person we might examine or judge is virtuous or merely self-controlled. The inability to know someone else's virtue-status is part of Kant's concern in the *Groundwork*. My concern lies at an angle to his: the problem (add scare quotes as necessary) of knowledge with regard to virtue is an alternate expression of the invisibility of the process by which we grow in virtue, where invisibility is a visual metaphor for a kind of silence. This is part of the silence of moral life under investigation: How much of moral life is unseen? How much remains unseen in us by others but also in us by ourselves? The possibility for the transition from self-control to virtue should help to render more perceptible the kind of silence I am exploring.

However admirable the observable behaviors exhibited by the enkratic person, she is nevertheless not (yet) virtuous. The self-controlled person develops a habitual practice of acting in spite of her vicious feelings or inclinations.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, the self-controlled person will have to spend much more energy to achieve her self-controlled state.<sup>16</sup> The virtuous person loves virtue and it pleases her to be virtuous. (Even if the reasons for having to be virtuous are not so beloved: the virtuous person chooses courage

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15. Here I mean vicious in its most literal sense, characterized by vice. The self-controlled person might not be fighting *evil* inclinations in order to behave properly. Those inclinations may be merely base.

16. Lisa Tessman makes much of the weariness and psychic pain (that must be) experienced by the morally divided person in "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation" *Social Theory and Practice* 26 no. 3 (Fall 2000): 375–95.

because courage is desirable and excellent; she still might wish, all things considered, that the situation that requires courage were not the case.) This means that the virtuous person can trust and follow her inclinations, and this makes action simple (though not at all necessarily easy).

The self-controlled person will do the right things and at the right times but not always or entirely for the right reasons, and she will not tend to have the right feelings about her actions. This is what disqualifies her from virtue in an Aristotelian account; it may even disqualify her on a Kantian account as well.<sup>17</sup> Both Annie Dillard and Iris Murdoch offer what might be considered (fictional but) plausible examples of morally self-controlled persons. Both create characters who behave beautifully—much like the actually virtuous person might behave—in spite of the lack of coincidence between inner and outer life. A closer look at both of these characters should provide some clues that will help to fill in the otherwise spare map of moral growth and self-creation.

In “The Idea of Perfection,” Iris Murdoch describes a moral transformation that relies on the silence of the enkratic moral agent. Murdoch begins the essay by observing that philosophy, generally speaking, is characterized by competing motivations: “a

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17. Here I am thinking of recent examinations of Kant’s writings on virtue and of Johnson’s essay on self-improvement from a Kantian perspective: it may be that Kant does not coincide perfectly with Aristotle on the role of emotions in moral achievement. However, it is certainly plausible to imagine that the really moral person (from a Kantian perspective) will have made acting for the sake of duty so basic to his or her character that, like Aristotle’s virtuous person, she will be able to perceive situations in reliable ways, to act according to that reliable moral perception; and that moral activity will not require as much effort as it does for the self-controlled person: neither the Kantian person of good will nor the Aristotelian virtuous person will have to expend as much effort in order to choose to act in morally admirable ways. Instead of the constant battle to control baser inclinations, the virtuous person/person of good will is free to trust her inclinations and so acts with greater ease. Theoretically and hypothetically speaking, of course.



movement towards the building of elaborate theories, and a move back again towards the consideration of simple and obvious facts.”<sup>18</sup> In moral philosophy, however, Murdoch claims that certain facts, like the centrality of love to morality or the possibility of virtue in the unexamined life, have been “forgotten or theorized away.”<sup>19</sup> The failure to recover such facts means that professional philosophers develop a picture of the average moral agent that is misleadingly narrow.<sup>20</sup>

Murdoch found the prevailing trends in secular Anglo-American ethics in the middle of the twentieth century inaccurate and unappealing because, in their exclusive focus on elegant theorizing, they ignored, dismissed, or simply neglected inner, private moral life. In order to show why it is necessary for moral philosophy to acknowledge the moral importance of inner life, Murdoch developed a hypothetical situation involving a mother-in-law, M, and her daughter-in-law, D. M finds D common, silly, and just plain does not like her. However, M not only behaves beautifully toward D at all times, she

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18. Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1971 [reprint 2009]), 1.

19. Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 2. It should be noted that “The Idea of Perfection” was first published in the *Yale Review* 1964, and is very much a product of its time—the philosophers who serve as Murdoch’s interlocutors flourished in the middle of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the reasons for Murdoch’s frustration with the moral philosophizing of her time remain largely relevant today—I came to this project because I could not easily account for the role of silence in moral life in ways that are immediately recognizable in prevailing moral theories.

20. Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” 4–9. I imagine that even the term “moral agent”—a term I use throughout this dissertation—could be viewed as a symptom of the inaccurate and misleading over-theorizing tendencies Murdoch criticizes.

My claim in this project is quite parallel to Murdoch’s: failing to recognize the presence and role of silence in moral life results in an inaccurate understanding or picture of moral life and thereby falsifies moral theories. A moral philosophy that cannot accommodate silence is one that cannot address human morality.

also chooses to investigate her feelings about D and to change them. Murdoch even stipulates that at some point there is a separation—M's son and daughter-in-law move away, perhaps—so that M's changed feelings cannot be attributed to any change in D's behavior or character. M comes to change her feelings and to love D just because she chooses to do so. This, Murdoch insists, is clearly moral behavior and moral activity and it is this area of moral life that does not find expression in the philosophies she criticizes.

My purposes are not to evaluate Murdoch's interpretation of the philosophical trends of her time, but rather, to point out first that what Murdoch describes sounds very much like the movement from *enkrasia* to virtue. Second, the moral growth Murdoch describes is growth that must happen silently. Murdoch does not talk about the silence in which M grows in virtue, but that silence is what I have spent this whole project learning to see and to show to others.

At the beginning of Murdoch's example, M does not only not love her daughter-in-law, she seems in fact to despise her. Moreover, her reasons for disliking her daughter-in-law are not ones that could count as morally acceptable reasons for disliking a person: When thinking of what she dislikes in D, M does not think of D's reprehensible habit for torturing kittens, stealing from homeless people, or fomenting genocides. Rather, M thinks of D's too-ready and too-loud laughter, her chirpy little voice, the way she forgets or refuses to defer to authority at every turn—in short, M's reasons for disliking D are neither reasonable nor morally acceptable. Nevertheless, motivated perhaps by a desire for superiority, the habitual performance of what has been called “good breeding,” love for her son, and respect for moral norms, M treats D as though she were a welcome

addition to the family. She is perfectly self-controlled and behaves in the right ways and at the right times but not for the right reasons or with the right feelings.

Murdoch tells us that M always “behaved beautifully.” This is her term for M’s behavior. It seems that for Murdoch’s example to work, “behaved beautifully” can be interpreted differently. M must always have behaved as though she loved D. This alone would make the transition from beautiful behavior to actual love seamless and invisible, which is indeed Murdoch’s intent. M does the work of love long before she feels it and finds, some years later, that she has indeed come to have different feelings about her daughter-in-law. Murdoch’s example then also coincides nicely with a broadly Aristotelian view of virtue and of the development of virtues. Both Lou (from *The Maytrees*) and M continually practice the virtues toward which they orient themselves and both develop stable, trustworthy dispositions toward acting in accordance with virtue as a result of their continual, dedicated practice.

However, Murdoch’s intentionally spare example opens itself up to questions that Murdoch does not explicitly address. Chiefly, if it is possible to pass as virtuous, what is it that could compel someone (like M) to try to achieve the transition from self-control to actual virtue? If a person felt the pull of virtue, what is it that could make it possible to realize that transition? Let us turn once more to Dillard’s character Lou Maytree. Like M, Lou never voiced her bitterness. Like M, Lou “behaved beautifully.” Nevertheless, Lou was found out by her friend Cornelius who gently showed her to herself. What happened? How can beautiful behavior fail? What is it that reveals the imperfection of feeling behind rigorously disciplined self-control?

The character Lou Maytree was, in some respects, much like Murdoch's M: she, too, "behaved beautifully." Her inner life did not coincide with the near-perfection of her outer behavior, just as M's inner life revealed her dislike for D. Lou changed her feelings about her husband and her husband's lover (her closest friend) apart from any other change made by either husband or lover (the pair of which had moved away to Maine, and so were as absent to Lou as D was to M during M's moral transformation). That is to say, the change in Lou cannot be attributed to a change in either of the guilty parties just as in Murdoch's example, the absence of the daughter-in-law is required to show that M's change owes only to the inner work undertaken by M and not to any change made by D in her behavior.

Lou even has better reasons than M for the mismatch between inner and outer life: Lou was betrayed by the two persons closest to her. That betrayal, unlike the daughter-in-law's hearty laughter, counts as a legitimate reason for disapprobation.<sup>21</sup> Still, all the evidence we have for Lou's behavior after her husband and friend betrayed points to its perfection. Granted, the novel is a work of fiction. Granted, too, that it is a narrative and not a chronicle:<sup>22</sup> there are no transcripts containing every word "Lou" ever spoke in the year and a half between her abandonment and Cornelius's gentle reproach; there is no

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21. This is not to say that there are good moral reasons for Lou to hate Maytree or Deary, or for her to cultivate bitterness, or for her to say cruel things about them. My only point is that Lou's hurt feelings themselves do not reveal Lou's non-virtuous state, and that this is a contrast to M, whose feelings do reveal her non-virtuous state (though only to herself).

22. Narratives depend for their cohesion as much on what is left out as what is put/left in. There must be an article or chapter somewhere about this; find it. Narratives absolutely depend on the presence and preservation of some silences in order to be able to tell a particular story (as opposed to a chronicle, which records all things equally in temporal sequence without an organizing goal or plot).

diary evidence producing a record of all the thoughts “Lou” ever thought during that time.<sup>23</sup> As with M, Lou’s behavior is beautiful. Unlike M, Lou is unaware of the lack of coincidence between inner life and outward behavior. She tries to be reasonable about the situation: “Downstairs she cracked kindling over her knee and boiled the kettle. Why sadder but wiser? Why not happier and wiser? What else could wisdom be? She drank coffee black. She would not fall apart.”<sup>24</sup>

Murdoch’s M works well as an example in support of Julia Annas’s claim that the enkratic person “does what is tactful, brave, or beneficent, but does not have the right feelings about it, whereas the virtuous person does.”<sup>25</sup> Except for M’s inner feelings—which no outsider can witness and then judge—M appears to be quite virtuous. So why be(come) virtuous? Consider Lou. Lou’s performance of peace and wisdom was so thoroughly put on that she concealed herself even from herself. Others wondered at her ability to forgive Maytree and Deary; Lou had convinced herself there was nothing to forgive. Only one friend, after having observed and participated in a year and a half of Lou’s performance of virtue, was able to perceive that Lou’s performance was a sham. Perhaps it simply is not possible to fully conceal one’s deepest moral feelings to all people all of the time. Perhaps, too, there are other clues than consistently correct words

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23. Here I put Lou’s name in quotation marks in an attempt to make it clear that I am very much aware of the fictional nature of the character “Lou.” Because she is not a real person, there could not have been a chronicle or evidence for transcription unless, of course, Annie Dillard, the author of the novel, chose to create it.

24. Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 85.

25. Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, 67.

and actions by which someone might discern someone else's inner states. And so like a friend trained up in Aristotle and Kant, Cornelius reproves Lou for her bitterness.<sup>26</sup>

If Lou's character is plausible, then self control, even perfect self control, might fall apart in the absence of moral growth. Murdoch's example is first of all, quite spare, omitting the kinds of details that would make it even clearer just how difficult it is to achieve and maintain perfectly self-controlled behavior. Second, Murdoch builds moral growth in nearly from the beginning, gliding over any recognition on M's part that, difficult as it is, self-control will not suffice for reliable, beautiful behavior. Lou's character can push us to see that without an orientation toward continued moral growth and inner moral change, self control will reveal its cracks and lumps to the attentive eye.

### **Martha Nussbaum and *The Golden Bowl*:**

#### **Silence in the Morally Salient Particular**

Literary art, as in the case of *The Maytrees* and, as I will discuss below, Henry James's novel, *The Golden Bowl*, can offer moving but fixed depictions of what moral growth can look like. By "moving" I mean that such stories can startle us emotionally, eliciting feelings and questions we had not experienced or recognized. I also like the implication of mobility in the word "moving": fictional and artistic literary images and stories rarely have a single or fixed meaning. There is sufficient depth in excellent art to arouse differing feelings in different people; even the same person might experience different reactions at different times. The meaning of a skilfully written work may not be fixed but

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26. Robert N. Johnson writes that "Kant himself claimed that it is a friend's duty to point out one's faults" in *Self-Improvement: An Essay in Kantian Ethics*, 6 n12. He does not, unfortunately, point to a place in the Kantian corpus where Kant makes this claim. Aristotle's writing on friendship in Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics* comes off a little gentler.

the words themselves and the story or image they convey is. The words of *To the Lighthouse* do not change or move for different readers or different readings; we may have different reactions but we react to the same artistic stimulus. These depictions can make an implicit argument for the preference of growing beyond self-control and toward virtue, as Nussbaum insists in her essays in *Love's Knowledge* and as I tried to show above in my discussion of Lou Maytree's moral growth.

It may be that literary art can also provide a model for the kind of activity that results in personal transformation or self-creation. Characters and stories offer depictions of exemplary persons and activity, and it might also be that the process of self-creation is significantly similar to the process of creating a literary text. Thinking about self-growth and self-creation as analogous to that of creating a literary text offers a possible clue to understanding what happens during the silences that make other people's self-creation invisible to us.<sup>27</sup>

In her work on literature and philosophy, Martha Nussbaum grapples with questions of moral development quite like those discussed in this current study. Nussbaum argues for the inclusion of novels in moral philosophy, claiming that richly detailed, psychologically persuasive literary art trains our moral imaginations and strengthens our capacities for attention and perception; such novels teach us not only how to pay attention in general, but how to train our attention on morally relevant but often under-acknowledged particulars. For example, a reader might begin to notice that she

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27. Cf. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.)

loves a certain character even without being able to explain why or for which good reasons, and that love might prompt further reflection.<sup>28</sup> Or a reader may notice that a character is changing without understanding the nature of or reasons for that change. Reflection about literary characters and plots can move a reader gently toward informal moral hypotheses and moral arguments as she reviews the ambiguous “evidence” that guides her questions and awareness.<sup>29</sup> These arguments require us to do quite the same work as we must do when we try to make sense of the people around us and of the tendencies of those people to grow and shift and change.

Interestingly, the novel Nussbaum reads and discusses in her chapters about moral perception and adult moral development is a novel full of silences. At the center of *Love's Knowledge* are two chapters that claim that Henry James's novel *The Golden Bowl* reveals an affinity with Aristotelian ethics. Some readers note that there is as little plot in *The Golden Bowl* as there is in a novel like *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>30</sup> James's novel examines the Verver family and their spouses over the course of a few years. Wealthy American art collector Adam Verver and his daughter, Maggie, acquire Amerigo, a titled but poor Italian prince for Maggie's husband. Shortly thereafter, they add to their

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28. This is the theme of chapter fourteen of *Love's Knowledge*: Martha C. Nussbaum, “Steerforth's Arm: Love and the Moral Point of View” in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Literature and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 335–364.

29. Nussbaum's chapters on *The Golden Bowl* in *Love's Knowledge* suggest that philosophers have an important role to play in reading and understanding literary art, as they may be well prepared to get “the tip,” in a Wittgensteinian sense, translating ambiguous literary representations of moral life into moral arguments.

30. For example, Daniel Brudney notes that the choice of *The Golden Bowl* as an example of moral literature *should* surprise because “almost nothing *happens*.” See Brudney, “Knowledge and Moral Silence: *The Golden Bowl* and Moral Philosophy,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 no. 2 (Winter, 1990): 397.



collection Charlotte, Maggie's old school friend who is well-traveled and urbane but, like Amerigo, also poor; after Maggie's marriage to the Prince, Adam and Charlotte marry. What Adam and Maggie do not know is that Amerigo and Charlotte had been lovers before having been absorbed into the Verver family. When Adam and Maggie slip into their accustomed father-daughter dyad, so, too, do the Prince and Charlotte. Maggie's discovery of the affair is the hinge on which the entire novel turns.

Until she discovered her husband's affair, Maggie had been naively moralistic, by which I mean that she had a sense of right and wrong uncomplicated by shades and nuances.<sup>31</sup> She loves her husband, loves her father, and loves (or at least loved) her friend; confronted by her husband's and friend's duplicity, Maggie chose to face the situation squarely; her choice to see and respond rather than to turn away is the action that drives the narrative arc in the second half of the novel. I feel I cannot stress enough how small and yet how significant this choice is, both for Maggie as a character, and for the novel as a piece of narrative literature. It is Maggie's choosing to see what is the case that drives the novel to its end. The betrayal Maggie suffers may bear some similarity to that suffered by Lou in *The Maytrees*; though Maggie, like Lou, regains her husband, the path to that recovery is different and is worth mentioning, even if inadequately. Maggie—and Nussbaum is quite good at bringing this out—must learn to fall, morally speaking. She has to make moral choices that wound, to learn to see comparative and not absolute value. Maggie has to learn to see and to bear the messy, painful, complex world with its complicated and exclusive loves and choices if she is to grow into moral

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31. I am not making an original claim here. Nussbaum writes extensively about Maggie's transition from moral naif to mature moral agent in *Love's Knowledge*.

adulthood and to transform her marriage with the Prince into a loving partnership.

Maggie has to choose between her loyalties to her father, her husband, and her friend; indeed, she has to choose between her attachment to the idea of perfection on the one side and her desire to give and receive real love on the other.

Nussbaum's reading of Maggie's moral transformation is a strong one, and I have no issue with her claims for the moral worth of depictions of moral development and transformation. Nussbaum's argument for an alliance with an Aristotelian ethics is similarly acceptable to me. Nussbaum generally directs readers to note the fitness or rightness to which Maggie and her father appeal when they act from their moral sense; as the novel progresses, their sense of the rightness or fineness of behaviors becomes increasingly precise. This sense of rightness inheres not just in the words or actions themselves but in the tone, gestures, expressions, and other barely expressible qualities from which the words and actions themselves cannot be divorced (i.e., there is no verbalized statement that carries no tone with it). It is to these difficult to describe, impossible to prescribe qualities that Nussbaum points when she praises the rightness of Maggie's words or Adam's response. These belong to what is "uncodifiable" in the Aristotelian ethical sense.

So much of the evidence for Maggie's moral growth lies in the things that Maggie thinks and keeps to herself; the ways that Maggie learns to guide conversations so that she can keep from saying something directly but nevertheless achieve some understanding—much like the elliptical conversations in *To the Lighthouse*. Nussbaum focuses on the rich detail in *The Golden Bowl*, and it must be admitted that, for detail, the

novel is positively gilded gold. However, a wealth of detail does not lead inevitably or obviously to a clear, unambiguous, perfect understanding of the situation so amply described. Although lush detail can focus the reader's attention on the person, situation, item, or scene depicted, it must be remembered that it will never be either possible or desirable to offer the reader everything. No matter how rich the detail, something must be omitted or passed over in order for something more important to stand out. In the case of *The Golden Bowl*, the meticulously shaped attentive description may obscure a clear grasp of what it is that is refused to or withheld from the reader.<sup>32</sup>

Detailed narrative description distracts the reader from noticing the kinds of things not described or discussed. For example, I could devote a whole page to a careful description of the cup holding my coffee and you might not notice that I kept quite silent about the coffee in the cup. So, too, with novels (or episodes of life) as a whole: When confronted by the insistent wordiness of novels like *The Golden Bowl*, it can become more difficult to notice what is not present, displayed, or shared. Next to *The Golden Bowl*, the spareness of a novel like *The Maytrees* seems even more obvious and apparent. But what all the detailed, wordy description can obscure is that in *The Golden Bowl*, so many of those lovely words are dedicated to describing and preserving silence, particularly the silence of words held back and of thoughts unvoiced. Certainly one of the themes in *The Golden Bowl* is Maggie Verver's transformation from moral innocent to

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32. Daniel Brudney agrees that moral concerns comprise much of the novel's subject matter but draws attention to the fact that they "either go unspoken or are raised expressly to be suppressed, banished from articulation" ("Knowledge and Moral Silence: *The Golden Bowl* and Moral Philosophy," 397). This compares favorably with the silence of preterition described in chapter two: silences may be constructed by careful allusion.

moral agent. The silence in which moral growth like Maggie's takes place is missing in the discussions of the enkratic and in Nussbaum's accounts of the role of literature in moral philosophy.

Let us briefly review the argument in this chapter so far: First, there is in moral philosophy, the concept of the self-controlled person who behaves beautifully, very much like the virtuous person does, but who has not yet achieved virtue. The self-controlled person does the right things at the right time but without the right feelings—the self-controlled person does not love goodness for its own sake. Second, the self-controlled person is already oriented toward virtue in some way (or could not have achieved self-control). She might, like Murdoch's mother-in-law M, be motivated by ideals of perfection to transform her self-control into virtue. She might, like Dillard's Lou, be motivated by the revelation that self-control and right action that does not reach toward virtue will not be perfect and can be found out. Third, the movement from controlled right action toward virtue happens largely in silence. M silently behaved as though she always loved her daughter-in-law. Lou carved out time for intentional solitude in order to keep her self-reflection private and silent. And Maggie Verver outwardly carried on much as she always had done. It is her "carrying on" that covers the inner silence that provides the reflective space from which she gains a new vantage point for moral vision.

We now have, in this chapter alone, three different examples of moral change. Moreover, these three examples can be arranged along a continuum of abstractness and detail. Murdoch's hypothetical example is, with regard to its lack of context and detail, quite typical for philosophical writing. Dillard's spare novel brings silence to the fore in

the way it overtly resists readers' desires for the kinds of details and pacing that open a character up for understanding. James's novel, on the other hand, can overwhelm a reader with detail. In this way, James's writing makes it quite clear that it is not necessary to practice or develop an ascetic attitude in order to create in and with silence, and that it is not strictly necessary to cultivate solitude in order to protect the silence in which moral transformation takes place.

Several questions will guide this brief tour through Nussbaum's writings on literature and (moral) philosophy. Here I state the questions as well as brief answers: First, what does Nussbaum have to say about the role of literature in moral philosophy / moral life? We will find that Nussbaum, like others before her, claims that there are moral concepts and values that cannot be expressed primarily in argument form. Instead, these require certain kinds of literary expression.<sup>33</sup>

Second, how do Nussbaum's arguments for the inclusion of literary art in moral philosophy relate to my argument about *enkrasia*? I will claim that the moral values that she identifies and affirms in *The Golden Bowl*—particularly with regard to character Maggie Verver's rejection of the moral innocence linked to perfection and generality in

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33. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 3; I mean "primarily" quite literally here. Nussbaum very clearly affirms the role that philosophy plays in laying out in clear, formal prose the principles and values that underlie the fictional art she holds as literary moral philosophy (the part about getting the tip); this kind of expository writing, however, follows after the text it discusses. The secondary philosophical exposition, in fact, is rather like speculative claims and arguments made for artistic silences as discussed in chapter three of this project: just as arguments for the value of artistic silences are always provisional and perspectival, and cannot conclusively fill or evaluate them, so too are the arguments made for the moral values depicted in literary art equally elusive. Even for a novel like *Hard Times*, which is nearly canonical as a literary depiction and criticism of utilitarianism, the moral values and expressions in the novel are not exhausted or exhaustible by the philosophical arguments thereupon.

favor of the awareness of good and evil that comes with choosing particular loves and particular aims—easily fall into the category of moral self-transformation and moral self-creation, and that the examples she chooses rely as much on silence as do the examples that I have chosen to guide my project as a whole.

Third, what, in the end, is Nussbaum's position regarding how to go about transforming one's moral character? Here, I think we will find that her answers, though somewhat more satisfying than those offered above, ultimately share in the same weakness noted at the beginning of this chapter: for both Nussbaum and Stark (above), love is a crucial element in moral transformation. How that love comes to be remains unvoiced and mysterious. If we do not already love goodness, how do we come to love goodness? If we do not already love the kind of literature that can help us to become more morally perceptive, how do we come to love it? These questions remain, and the silence in which moral growth takes place grows louder.

“And there's no safety in that, no safety at all.”<sup>34</sup>

Martha Nussbaum begins *Love's Knowledge* with an explicit acknowledgment of the inseparability of form and content, and this acknowledgment makes possible the engagement with literary art throughout the collection of essays.

But this suggests, too, that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.<sup>35</sup>

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34. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Literature and Philosophy*, 138.

35. *Ibid.*, 3.

The style in which one writes conveys “a sense of what life is and what has value.” Ideas, concepts, insights, values, and even truths themselves do not exist prior to language; they cannot put on discursive styles like costumed characters. And so, Nussbaum claims, “only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them.”<sup>36</sup>

Nussbaum’s claims about the relationship between form and content are not new; indeed, she appears to be echoing Simone de Beauvoir in her formulation:

There may even be thoughts that cannot, without contradiction, be expressed in a categorical manner. Thus, the novel is the sole form of communication for Kafka, since he wishes to portray the drama of man confined in immanence. To speak of the transcendent, if only to say that it is inaccessible, would already be claiming to have some access to it. An imaginary account, on the other hand, allows us to respect this silence that is alone appropriate to our ignorance.<sup>37</sup>

Beauvoir, however, does not restrict her observation to narrative form; she remains open to a range of literary styles and to a corresponding range of philosophically salient thoughts. Later in this chapter, I will argue more explicitly that Nussbaum’s focus on the narrative elements of the prose she so admires blinds her to other moral qualities that resist narrative telling, such as silence.

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36. Nussbaum, *Loves’s Knowledge*, 6.

37. Simone de Beauvoir, “Literature and Metaphysics” in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 274.

In “Flawed Crystals: James’s *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy,”<sup>38</sup> Martha Nussbaum argues specifically for the moral worth of novels like Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*. Such novels, she claims, offer a particular—and fixed—vision of the uncodifiable practical wisdom that characterizes virtue in Aristotle’s ethics.<sup>39</sup> In chapters four and five of *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum offers her reading of *The Golden Bowl* to advance her more general argument for the close relationship between literary art and moral philosophy, and her choice is instructive.

One of Nussbaum’s aims in upholding *The Golden Bowl* as an example of moral activity and as a depiction of moral life—of certain kinds of moral values and ideals—is to show that “in good deliberation and judgment, the particular is in some sense prior to general rules and principles.”<sup>40</sup> She offers three reasons for this: First, careful attention to particulars is required for a clear understanding of the context within which one must act; without strong powers of perception, one cannot “begin to figure out which rules and standing commitments are operative here.”<sup>41</sup> Second, knowledge, even thorough, masterful knowledge, of the rules and principles that describe morally laudable behavior is insufficient for producing virtuous behavior. Knowing that acting “at the right times, with reference to the right objects, toward the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way, is what is appropriate and best, and this is characteristic of excellence,” is not

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38. Nussbaum, pages 125–46 in *Love’s Knowledge*.

39. For more on this uncodifiability, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2002).

40. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 165.

41. *Ibid.*, 156.



the same as actually acting from an accurate sense of all those “rightnesses.”<sup>42</sup>

Knowledge of the rules is no guarantee that one will be able to act in accordance with those rules in a way that demonstrates morally admirable feelings that make right action so estimable. Lou Maytree, we might conjecture, had a strong sense of the rules that govern the proper way to speak about the husband that left you for your best friend. Nothing that she *said* was ever improper. But her friend Cornelius, a poet whose attention was well-trained, was attuned to the (probable) wrongness in the tone that kept Lou from achieving true virtue or excellence in her behavior.<sup>43</sup>

Third, Nussbaum notes that “there are elements in...good action that cannot even in principle be captured in antecedent “standing formulations, however right and precise—either because they are surprising and new, or because they are irreducibly particular.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, it will not be possible to create a rule that says that one must wash gently the bedsores of one’s husband’s lover. When Lou Maytree did this, it was an example of morally excellent action; the rule as just formulated above cannot capture or convey the excellence of Lou’s behavior. The best rules we can come up with to cover Lou’s behavior when Maytree and Deary return to Provincetown sound unhelpfully

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42. I’ve taken the quote from Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b21–23) from Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 156.

43. In this chapter in particular, Nussbaum makes much of the importance of getting just the right tone for the practice of real love, sacrifice, and generosity. Getting the right tone is required for the achievement of excellence. We are not off the hook, morally speaking, if we do the right things at the right time to and for the right people but without the right tone; that, she claims, is obtuse and “obtuseness is a moral failing; its opposite can be cultivated” (*Love’s Knowledge*, 156).

44. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 157.

general and vague: “Love others, even if they have hurt you in the past”; “Forgive the people that have hurt you”; “Relinquish ego and self-preference so that you can see others and your relationships to them more clearly.” Such “rules” can only, at best, describe something already accomplished or set up ideals for future contemplation. They are not helpful for achieving right action and the opposite of obtuseness *now*.<sup>45</sup>

In “Practical Wisdom Scrutinized,” Sabina Lovibond draws on the Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom in her argument for a quietist account of moral maturation. On the one hand, “people who have the quality of *phronêsis*... will have a good eye for the evaluatively significant particular, and so will be among the active supporters of that structure of concern which makes such a particular “significant (that is, potentially action-guiding) in the first place.”<sup>46</sup> That is, the person of practical wisdom will be perceptive. On the other hand, “the other Aristotelian theme that we must notice in contemporary discussions of practical reason is that of the *uncodifiability* of what the virtuous person knows.”<sup>47</sup> These two things—particularity and uncodifiability—are identified as constitutive of Aristotle’s conception of the person of practical wisdom, and they guide Lovibond’s account of what it means and what it looks like to develop into a morally responsible person.

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45. In his reflections on Socrates as an inscrutable model for philosophy as an art for living, Alexander Nehamas arrives at a similar conclusion: “We are then left with some very abstract principles, like ‘Be relevantly different,’ ‘Accept everything about yourself,’ ‘Organize your features in an artistic manner,’ which are as empty as they are banal and useless.” (*The Art of Living*, 186).

46. Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, 28.

47. *Ibid.*, 29. Italics in original.

Lovibond expresses clearly the discursive limitations of the uncodifiability she and Nussbaum alike find so compelling in Aristotle. Lovibond writes that what the uncodifiability of what the virtuous person knows “amounts to is that someone who has been successfully initiated into a culture cannot make explicit all that she has thereby learned about the ethical—either about what counts as an instance of some concept figuring in the common ethical vocabulary, or about how to assess the relevant “saliency” of different value considerations bearing on a particular case.”<sup>48</sup> I suggest that for both Lovibond and Nussbaum, as well as for others whose writings on Aristotelian ethics, rule-making, or the limitations of moral principles turn them toward a positive appreciation for uncodifiability, that “uncodifiability” functions as a philosophical translation of a certain kind of ineffability in moral life and moral thought. That is, the concept and its use point us to the philosophical acknowledgment of a place for silence within moral philosophy already, and the appeal to uncodifiability in Lovibond and Nussbaum makes room for silence in both their works: Lovibond’s to the silence that surrounds the impossibility of expressing and fixing all the moral observations and responses we make; Nussbaum to the silence in which our perceiving takes place.<sup>49</sup>

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48. Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, Ibid.

49. I do not here claim that either of these authors is “really” writing about silence. I am trying to show that there is silence present in some ethical works already. My argument throughout the dissertation has been (1) silence is part of what we do, morally speaking, so here is how we can learn to see it; (2) there is already silence in moral philosophy even if that silence has been “silenced,” so to speak. This is not to say that moral philosophies have “really” been “about” silence; it is just to say that there is room for an acknowledgment of silence in already extant philosophical works. In this sense, my dissertation shares some of the “quietist” elements of Lovibond’s book: I am not creating something new. I am trying to make visible and point out something that is already there. —Silence is not there in any obvious, star-of-the-show way; rather, silence is part of the structure and it also haunts the works in much the same way as

Nussbaum's claim that literary art conveys thoughts not expressible in other forms therefore coincides with my claims for the presence and necessity of silence in moral life, particularly for moral self-creation. Indeed, she writes convincingly about the indirect, invisible learning that can precede the sudden recognition or understanding of deepened moral insight:

Now I can go further, claiming that the moral role of rules themselves, in this conception, can only be shown inside a story that situates rules in their appropriate place vis-à-vis perceptions.... The moral work involved in giving and getting "the tip" could hardly be shown to us in a work of formal decision theory; it could not be shown in any abstract philosophical prose, since it is so much a matter of learning the right sort of vision of the concrete. It could not be shown well even in a philosopher's example, inasmuch as an example would lack the full specificity, and also the indeterminacy of the literary case, its rich metaphors and pictures, its ways of telling us how characters come to see one another as this or that and come to attend to new aspects of their situation.<sup>50</sup>

Art can hold more ambiguity and convey more silence than can treatise-style texts. We saw this in the novels and memoirs—narrative description and access to characters' unspoken thoughts allows us as readers to imaginatively "see" what the practice of silence looks like in a way impossible to convey without the use of narration. Novels, therefore, may be one of the best ways to convey silence and to teach the moral values—good and bad—in silence. Including novels (or some novels, at least) as part of the "canon" of philosophical expressions of morality is a step toward an approach to and practice of philosophy that contains the requisite elements to permit the study of silence as part of moral life.

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images support otherwise "rational" philosophical arguments. See Michele LeDoeuf, *The Philosophical Imaginary* trans. Colin Gordon (London: Continuum, 2002).

50. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 160–161.

It is not, then, that I am unconvinced by Nussbaum's arguments for the inclusion of literature; indeed, my whole project relies upon both novels and memoirs as a training program for learning to "see" silence. Whereas Nussbaum restricts herself to narrative art and to the kinds of thoughts that can be expressed in narrative, I am less attracted to the narrativity of the art to which I point. My focus throughout this project has been the silences that resist saying and telling; these silences disrupt narrative writing and themselves are not narrational in structure. I discuss Nussbaum's plea for the inclusion of narrative works like *The Golden Bowl* in order to point to features that are underappreciated in Nussbaum's writings (but to which some critics like Cora Diamond and Daniel Brudney gesture): the novel she holds up as rich in detail and therefore an iron against which to finely hone perception is also a novel rich in silence and the silence she overlooks is absolutely necessary for the moral growth she admires.

### **Nussbaumian Moral Growth**

The characters in *The Golden Bowl* are not vicious; they are hardly even weak-willed (that is, it would be difficult to argue that the key characters embody *akrasia*). They are generally possessed of fine intentions and high-minded values. They even, for the most part, behave beautifully, to return to Murdoch's phrase. Like *The Maytrees* and Murdoch's hypothetical example featuring mother-in-law M, and like Alice Koller's account of herself in *An Unknown Woman*, *The Golden Bowl* offers, among other things, a vision of moral growth and moral self-creation. Like the other examples, James's novel is also suffused with silence. Where *The Golden Bowl* may be said to depart from the other texts is in its unflinching insistence on imperfection. Cultivating moral strength

does not lead to moral perfection, at least not in the sense of faultlessness. In fact, James's novel seems to imply the opposite, that the ability to act with moral deliberateness and strength in an imperfect world cannot be developed if one is unwilling to fall, to fail, to be fully human and fallible. Nussbaum writes that "the second half of the novel is the story of Maggie's initiation into knowledge of her fallen world. Beginning to *live*... is, for her, beginning to see that meaningful commitment to a love in the world can require the sacrifice of one's own moral purity. To regain her husband she must damage Charlotte."<sup>51</sup>

The perils of moral transformation are not quite so clear in Dillard's or Murdoch's examples. Lou's self-growth is portrayed as difficult but also as being comparatively pure—it does not require her to reject or harm or wound anyone and it makes possible a kind of inclusive, forgiving love that appears heroic. It is James's novel that shows the extent to which moral self-creation is perilous. Good choices and projects are not always clearly marked as such. Becoming a particular person with particular loves and projects requires letting go of other loves and aims, some of which might be equally worthy. (It is not for nothing that Nussbaum's collection is entitled "Love's Knowledge."<sup>52</sup>) Moral activity is rarely a single-vectored thing and *The Golden Bowl* shows, in its difficult prose, "the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice, and ... the

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51. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 134.

52. "And what if it is love one is trying to understand, that strange unmanageable phenomenon or form of life, source at once of illumination and confusion, agony and beauty? Love, in its many varieties, and their tangled relations to the good human life, to aspiration, to general social concern? What parts of oneself, what writing, should one choose then? What is, in short, love's knowledge?" (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 4).

childishness, the refusal of life involved in fixing everything in advance according to some system of inviolable rules.”<sup>53</sup>

What *The Golden Bowl* also shows but rarely explicitly discusses is the inward orientation of moral vision, moral decision-making, and moral maturation. The picture of moral development that emerges from a global reading of Nussbaum’s work is laudable, invigorating, even. One can hardly help but feel cheered and energized by the thought that moral growth and improvement flourish on a diet rich in art—literary and otherwise—and trained on attention. So what then ought we to *do*?

A few pages back I offered a long quote from *Love’s Knowledge* in which Nussbaum introduced the Wittgensteinian concept of “getting the tip.” Since “the moral work involved in giving and getting “the tip” could hardly be shown to us in a work of formal decision theory; it could not be shown in any abstract philosophical prose, since it is so much a matter of learning the right sort of vision of the concrete”—we might therefore consider ourselves off the hook. Moral growth happens in silence and that silence is uncodifiable. So what more is there to say? Naturally I think this is an inadequate answer. Like Lou, M, and even Maggie Verver, we should be able to reflect on points at which we have gotten the tip and see it for what it is—that is, see it for the change and amplification of (moral) self that it is. That reflection, even if it cannot be pressed into formal or universal rules or shared with others, can at least, in a general sense, be explored.

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53. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 141–2.

Furthermore, if the work of moral growth and moral achievement is to rest upon getting (or giving) the tip, then we ought to have a general sense about how one goes about doing this. To this end, Nussbaum likens the development of moral maturity to improvisation, specifically the kind of improvisatory jam sessions held by brilliant jazz musicians. Nussbaum contrasts the difference in musical autonomy between a symphony player and a jazz musician. The instrumentalist in the symphony orchestra has “commitments and continuities [that] are external, coming from the score and the conductor. Her job is to interpret those signals.” Note that this does not eliminate any responsibility on the part of the instrumentalist: she has a clear and strong responsibility to maintain her ability to read music and to play her instrument with as much skill and grace as she can muster. She is charged with the responsibility to learn the score well enough that she can pay close attention to the conductor while also following the notes printed in her sheet music.

The jazz musician, on the other hand, “will be more responsible than the score-reader, not less, to the unfolding continuities and structures of the work.” The musician whose art depends upon improvisation “must choose in full awareness and responsibility to the historical traditions of the form, and actively honor at every moment her commitments to her fellow musicians, whom she had better know as well as possible as unique individuals” (or at least as unique musicians). “These two cases indicate to us, then, that the perceiver who improvises is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and



especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are forged freshly on each occasion.”<sup>54</sup>

If this analogy is to stand,<sup>55</sup> then one should be able to create the best conditions for getting the tip and learning the unteachable wisdom of moral mastery by strengthening just those “external” commitments that seem to signal stunted or burgeoning development. If you want to improvise beautifully and responsibly on, for example, a soprano saxophone, you have to know how to play a soprano saxophone. The better you can play your instrument, the better your chances of being able to create your own (musical; moral) expressions that build on those created by (musical; moral) artists and geniuses before you. The more you know about reading scores and following conductors, the more you can bring to each (musical; moral) jam session. There remains the possibility for the moral or musical untaught genius, and I think this is a welcome if unexplored feature of her analogy. What is troubling is that the shift from “score-reading” to improvisation, which is a necessary feature of the point she is trying to make about the necessity of improvisation in moral life, is kept unarticulated. How is it we become able to improvise? How do we know when improvisation is permitted? When required? In music this is not so difficult to discern. But in daily moral life, it is. Nussbaum’s reading of *The Golden Bowl* shows clearly the danger and risk in moral life, but Nussbaum remains silent about the risk involved in identifying the time and place for risk.

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54. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 94.

55. And Nussbaum must think it can do, as she repeats it several times throughout the book.

In the end, it seems that Nussbaum is left with little more to say than this:

“Individuals simply ask what looks deepest, what they can least live without—guided by their sense of life, and by their standing interest in consistency and community. That is, they want to arrive at a view that is internally coherent, and also at one that is broadly shared and sharable.”<sup>56</sup> This, paradoxically, brings Nussbaum closest to and furthest from the wisdom that can be found in a morality that makes room for silence, and it is this that shows, I think, that Nussbaum writes around silence so beautifully but misses the silence around which she writes.

“Individuals simply ask what looks deepest” can be considered a translation of the Murdochian moral imperative to let go of fantasy and to see instead what is real. One must commit to the discipline of inner, reflective work to arrive at responsible answers to the questions What is the most true? What is it that I can affirm? As a result, one finds that what is deepest will be at once extremely subjective and also perfectly objective: “The true artist is obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related in what seems an external manner.”<sup>57</sup> Thus Murdoch leads the moral pilgrim toward moral knowledge: “Goodness joins with knowledge, moral vision is cognitive.”<sup>58</sup>

With regard to sharability, it may be that Nussbaum and Murdoch differ and quite strongly. Murdoch may profess that philosophy must speak in the “cold, clear voice” she

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56. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 174.

57. Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 61.

58. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 436.

is so often quoted for, but she nevertheless believes quite strongly in the primacy of the inner, unspoken practices and experiences of moral life. The silence in which we transform ourselves from mere self-control to something that better approximates real virtue is something that cannot be broken—this is not sharable moral work. It is not sharable because it may require a good deal of solitude, and it is not sharable because it cannot easily be spoken about to anyone else. It is work that must be done alone. The solitary nature of this work is what makes it most suitable to improvisation: when a person does the work of seeing clearly in order to determine what looks deepest, then she becomes, of necessity, her own composer and conductor, creating in obedience to an idea of perfection and recalibrating accordingly. She must affirm her choices and movements and take full responsibility all the more when there is no one who can be brought to share, without damage, in the process and reasons for her outward performance.

I have certainly sounded more critical of Nussbaum than I feel myself to be. I admire her project in *Love's Knowledge* without reservation. What I find, however, is that even Nussbaum has a difficult time describing the process whereby one moves from a desire for moral goodness into moral goodness itself; whereby one transitions from respect and desire for virtue toward love for goodness and virtue. Although Iris Murdoch is much stricter in her stated preferences for genres of philosophical writing, there are features of her writings, particularly in *The Sovereignty of Good* that better describe these moments of moral change, and by a happy coincidence they share much with the characteristics of silence I have found in my research. To these I will turn in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX  
SILENCE AND ATTENTION

But Pete's movement was all internal. He never let his father know.  
—*The Maytrees*

In the winter of 1962, Alice Koller rented a house on Nantucket for three months. She spent her time there thinking and writing in order to determine first, what it was she wanted to do, second, whether or not to kill herself and third, if she chose to live, why and how to live. Two years before her retreat to Nantucket, Koller had graduated from Harvard with her doctoral degree in philosophy. Having graduated, she struggled to find full time work of any kind, let alone work that could be or become a part of a reason for living. She has never held a tenure-track faculty job at any university. For the past half century she has cobbled together freelance work as she can find it in order to make time for the writing she considers her life work. In addition to her professional disappointments, Koller made herself miserable in unfulfilling romantic relationships that she felt powerless to resist. Sick of dead-end jobs and relationships, she sought a place where she could try to think clearly in order to figure out what she ought to do. This chapter examines her account of that retreat, published as *An Unknown Woman*.

Unlike the memoirists Sara Maitland or Anne LeClaire, Koller did not set out to seek silence. Her overt goal was solitary escape for the purposes of reflection and reinvention. Nevertheless, in her quest for solitude she encountered silence. Moreover, what Koller did to change her inner life is remarkably like what Murdoch theorizes in the

essays collected in *The Sovereignty of Good* and what Dillard depicts in the character of Lou Maytree in *The Maytrees*. On top of it all, Koller is a trained philosopher who deliberately, explicitly harnesses philosophical methods in her attempt to learn to see herself clearly and to see clearly for herself. This is not the same as philosophy as self-help or as popular psychology. This is a philosopher using philosophically sound methods of thinking in order to arrive at an answer to the question “How shall I live?”<sup>1</sup>

In Koller’s accounts, what comes across most clearly is the necessity of the disruption of old patterns and habits for moral change. Koller discusses this explicitly in both her books: in *An Unknown Woman*, she describes the disruption as her purpose while on Nantucket; in *Stations of Solitude*, she makes the more general claim that identifying and assessing all the constitutive elements of one’s personality is necessary for clearly seeing oneself and for moving forward deliberately and freely.<sup>2</sup> She further claims that self-creation requires letting go of habits (behavioral, intellectual, emotional, relational) that one cannot genuinely endorse, or that serve no good purpose and that this must take place before one can begin the process of thoughtful self-creation. I will

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1. There is a journal in adult developmental theory in which one of the authors uses Koller and her experiences and memoirs as an example of adult development from the perspective of psychological theory. (See Kathleen Taylor, “Development as Separation and Connection: Finding a Balance” *An Update on Adult Development Theory: New Ways for Thinking About the Life Course: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 84 (Winter 1999): 59–66.) I leave for others discussions regarding the convergence of psychological and moral development. My focus is on the inner moral work that Koller does while alone on Nantucket—the moral reflection and transformation that no one else could see or evaluate and that is therefore invisible to much of moral philosophy. Koller becomes a changed person during those three months and my second point, which will be developed further, is that the silence that suffused her solitude made that moral growth possible.

2. Alice Koller, *The Stations of Solitude* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1990).

discuss this in greater detail below in the sections “Relinquishment of Ego,” and “Recovery (or Creation) of Self.”

Although Koller never mentions Iris Murdoch in either of her published books, their thoughts converge significantly, so much so that Koller’s experience helps to bolster Murdoch’s claims and Murdoch’s more abstract writing can help to explain the philosophical importance of Koller’s experience. I will begin by laying out Murdoch’s claims for the role of attention and vision in moral life. Then I will show that Koller’s experiences on Nantucket and afterward bear out those claims. In so doing, the plausible-but-not-actual depictions in the novels discussed in chapter three and the actual-but-not-explicitly-moral experiences in the memoirs discussed in chapter four will gain authority: Koller’s experiences and reflections bear them out.

### **Iris Murdoch and the Moral Life**

#### Fantasy and Imagination

Central to Murdochian ethics is attention to what is real. Murdoch takes from Simone Weil the concept of attention and shows how it is a fundamentally moral activity. For Weil, attention is a religious orientation toward the real, which is God. For Murdoch, attention is a moral orientation toward the real, which is (the) Good. Murdoch writes that “the chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what there is outside one.”<sup>3</sup> Fantasy, unlike imagination, obscures moral vision by

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3. Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” in *The Sovereignty of Good*, (New York: Routledge, 1971; reprint 2009), 57.

distracting the self from what is real and by focusing attention on things that are not real. Fantasy is not the same thing as imagination.<sup>4</sup> Imagination is rooted in reality and its exercise makes it possible to become something other than you currently are. For example, I can imagine seeking and even obtaining gainful employment some time in the coming year by combining my experiences in job-seeking and job-holding with what I know about the job market (culled from online and print resources), what I know anecdotally from the experiences of friends and acquaintances, and the advice offered me by my mentors. My imagination is therefore fully grounded in reality. If, on the other hand, I begin to picture to myself situations in which I am handed a million dollars out of the blue, or in which a plum job for which I have not trained but find myself miraculously suited is handed to me by a stranger suddenly moved to solve my employment problem, then I have let go of imagination and reality and entered fantasy. Fantasy untethers desire (to have a job) from reality (the need for actual skills and experience; the requirement to apply and court rejection). This is why Murdoch calls fantasy the enemy of moral excellence: if a person devotes her attention to what is not real, it will be extremely difficult (at best) for her to bring about or participate in any good that is real, and any goodness she does achieve will be derivative and accidental.

Moral life, then, requires that one turn away from fantasy and toward reality. W.

Scott Clifton puts it thus:

Being able to construct an accurate description of the world is important insofar as a central component of moral reasoning is the possession of knowledge,

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4. "What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called 'will' or 'willing' belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love." Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 65.

described by Murdoch as ‘not ...impersonal quasi-scientific knowledge of the ordinary world, whatever that may be, but with a refined and honest perception of what is really the case.’<sup>5</sup>

The point here is that unless we intentionally investigate our faculties of moral perception, we will not know whether we are fantasy/ego-oriented or imagination/reality oriented. Knowing whether fantasy or reality structures our patterns of perception is the first step; letting go of fantasy is the second; seeing reality and knowing it for what it is (that is, grasping the realness of reality) is the third.

The problem is in the first step: if you are already fantasy-oriented, how can you tell the difference between fantasy and reality? This is the problem that took Koller to Nantucket; she saw that she did not know what it was that motivated or sustained her, did not like the way her life was organized, and that she did not know what it was she could or should be doing. She writes, “It has to stop. Can’t I just stop, right now, and try to figure out what I’m doing? What I should be doing? If only I could go away somewhere. Somewhere quiet, without traffic or factories....Somewhere where I don’t have to do anything but think all day long.”<sup>6</sup> Although she does not come to see her faculties of perception as clouded by fantasy until a few weeks into the Nantucket trip, the catalyst for the trip was a brief moment of lucidity during which Koller noticed that she did not know herself—that she was creating patterns of behavior that she hated and that she felt she could not control. That is, Koller began the process of reorientation when she actually, uncharacteristically paid attention to her usual, oft-rehearsed complaints.

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5. W. Scott Clifton, “Murdochian Moral Perception, *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47 (2013): 211.

6. Alice Koller, *An Unknown Woman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 2.



For the fictional Lou Maytree, the catalyst came outside herself. Recall that Lou resisted examining herself until her friend Cornelius made her see that she was in fact bitter and that her bitterness was imperfectly concealed.<sup>7</sup> Jolted into seeing one small part of herself clearly, Lou, like Koller, seeks out a space from which to examine herself, to see what it is that she is doing. From those small, accidental beginnings, both the fictional Lou and the very real Koller learned how to pay attention to their thought patterns, beliefs, and fantasies which made it possible to let go of what was false and to orient themselves toward what is real.

The turn to reality begins with a commitment to cultivating perception and attention, even if that commitment is not well understood, either by outside observers and participants or by the person who is in the early stages of reorienting attention toward reality. Both Lou and Koller began to shift their patterns of attention after having experienced significant disappointments and this is likely to be no accident. As Margaret G. Holland puts it, attention requires first the willingness and then, later, the ability “empty one’s mind of content which would distract one from clearly seeing the object that one seeks to understand.”<sup>8</sup> Holland quotes Simone Weil: “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.”<sup>9</sup> Lou and Koller are willing to suspend their long-standing patterns of thinking

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7. “It was fearsome down there, a crusty cast-iron pot. Within she was empty. She would never poke around in those terrors and wastes again, so help her God.” Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 86. See also the second half of chapter three of this dissertation.

8. Margaret G. Holland, “Touching the Weights: Moral Perception and Attention” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (September 1998): 307.

9. Quoted in Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 306.

because they come to see, if only momentarily at first, that their customary habits of valuing, understanding, working, and loving have not served them well.

Iris Murdoch understands well that one cannot reason oneself out of such faulty patterns. She writes, “It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is an orientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source.”<sup>10</sup> Murdoch’s insight accurately describes the experiences of both Lou Maytree and Alice Koller. Neither woman was able to rationalize with herself and thereby produce lasting moral change. Recall from chapter three that Lou tried to tell herself that her husband’s betrayal did not have to devastate her. She could acknowledge that they had had many happy years together. She could list all the benefits to living alone. Nevertheless she fell apart and could not begin the process of recovery until someone outside herself showed her her own bitterness.

Koller’s experience was different, and this can be expected as she is an actual person. Koller had a doctoral degree from one of the most prestigious universities in the country. She was charismatic, highly intelligent, highly educated and able to see certain aspects or features of what personal satisfaction or professional success might look like. She just could not will herself to let go of self-sabotaging desires. Neither could she organize her whole life toward some goal she found worthy. She needed to reorient herself so that her energy could come from reality and not from fantasy but she did not yet know how to tune herself to that which is real. The first movement toward reorientation happened by accident when she noticed a passing acknowledgment that it

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10. Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good’” in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 54.

would be nice to be somewhere quiet in order to think about what to do and how to be.

What is remarkable is that she took that thought seriously and set out a plan for making it possible for her to achieve that quiet place for thought. That plan focused her attention and set her on her course of reorientation, and that is what changed the whole course of the rest of her life.

### Attention and Perception

In her article “Touching the Weights: Moral Perception and Attention,” Margaret Holland makes a set of nested claims that support my claims for silence. First, she argues that moral philosophy must be broad enough to accommodate both moral attention and perception (she distinguishes between the two in her article), and this is why she looks to Murdoch’s ethical essays as a source and guide. Second, following Murdoch, she argues for the importance of inner life to moral philosophy, claiming first that attention and perception are inner activities, and second that these inner activities belong to the realm of morality. My contribution is the almost excessively simple two-part observation that (a) inner activity is silent, invisible activity; my own is invisible to those around me and unvoiced by me to others. It may even, at some times, be invisible to me and unsayable to myself. Moreover, (b) the silence of such inner, moral activity must also come to be seen as a “proper topic for philosophical reflection.”<sup>11</sup> From there, it is easier to see that there may be other kinds of silence that are also worthy of attention from moral philosophers and of a place within moral philosophy.

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11. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 300.

To return to Holland's article, regarding the inner life she writes, "the inner activity of discernment is itself part of moral life, and such inner activity has moral value apart from any issue in conduct. Moreover, moral discernment provides the foundation for choice and action."<sup>12</sup> One could then say that Koller's initial recognition that her life was not appropriately organized and that she could benefit from the time and space to think without distraction was itself already a moral impulse, and would have remained a moral impulse even if nothing further came from that recognition. Moreover, it was that first, indefinite glimpse of reality that became the foundation for all of Koller's further choice and action, just as Holland claims. Without any guarantee that the time and space to think would genuinely change or improve her life, Koller nevertheless made securing that time and space her project. For the first time, her low-paying, entry-level jobs had a purpose: she would work until she earned just enough to pay a few months' rent somewhere out of the city. She had nothing planned beyond that, but that step was sufficient.

Holland distinguishes attention from perception in her article, calling attention "inner moral work which seeks to improve the quality of perception of independent reality."<sup>13</sup> Perceptiveness, as Martha Nussbaum convincingly argues, enriches moral life, expanding the number of subtle details available as objects of moral reflectiveness.<sup>14</sup> Attention is the inner commitment or orientation that precedes the cultivation of

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12. Holland, "Touching the Weights," 299.

13. *Ibid.*, 310.

14. Refer back to chapter five for a discussion of Nussbaum's arguments about awareness and perception in the cultivation of moral life.

perception and that guides the further refinement of perception. The attention that informs perception creates the conditions for apprehending and then potentially changing the patterns of interests, behavior, and awareness that make up moral life. The work of attention (the act of attending) is work that is often done silently and invisibly.

Holland notes that the principles to which one is committed structure perception so that phenomena that either clearly uphold or clearly erode those principles stand out against other criteria for evaluation. Holland writes, “If one is committed, for instance, to principles concerning procedural inequality, one is likely to notice when fairness is at issue. If one subscribes to the Catholic Church’s teaching on the “seven deadly sins,” then one is apt to notice circumstances in which pride, for example, is a moral problem.”<sup>15</sup> Perception makes visible the fairness or the pride. Attention makes visible the perception of the fairness or the pride. Cultivating attention helps a person to become aware of the patterns according to which he or she organizes her moral commitments, and this attention is part of the silent, reflective part of moral life that is difficult to share with others, prove to others, or see clearly in others.

Casting moral life as a system of patterns helps to frame several distinctions that continue to manifest in my arguments, such as the distinctions between attention and perception, inner and outer life, reflection and observable action, and even silence and speech or discourse. Framing these distinctions as patterns obviates an antagonistic interpretation in favor of a synergistic interpretation. It is not that a person must become attentive instead of perceptive or cultivate an inner life at the expense of an outer life.

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15. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 305.

Rather, I am shifting the focus away from the elements of moral life and moral philosophy that are easier to see and toward what is harder to see so that the larger patterns can become more visible, and so that the importance of that which is harder to see can become more visible. Lace, for example, is created by weaving delicate patterns with fine thread. Those patterns alternate empty space and thread so that the holes are as much a part of the fabric as is the thread. Silence is then like the holes in the lace. Perception reveals the holes as they relate to the thread; attention organizes the pattern of holes and thread. Holland refers to Max Scheler to make a similar point, writing that Scheler “suggests that one’s interests direct awareness so that one is inclined (or disinclined) to notice certain things in one’s surroundings, not necessarily because they stand out in an objective sense but because they fit a pattern of interests that one brings to the situation.”<sup>16</sup>

Silence then is part of the pattern of moral life, and by attending to silence, we can become more fully attentive to the patterns of commitments and principles we uphold. Silence is also a disruptor of patterns and the disruptive feature of silence is just as important to moral life. Silence, conceived as a kind of spatial emptiness, represents a break from or cessation of old patterns. Both Lou and Koller changed their lives in mid-life. They stood back, took stock, discarded habits that contradicted the principles they valued, and cultivated new habits and relationships that strengthened their moral commitments. They broke their old patterns in and with silence and from that silence crafted new ones that they deliberately chose.

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16. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 305.

Moral philosophy must be capable of examining and providing concepts for understanding moral transformations. What makes Alice Koller's experience so compelling is that she deliberately and explicitly examined her life philosophically in order to understand and then change it. Koller's example and her explanation of her processes serve as a guide for teaching and learning how to cultivate attention in order to expand moral vision, effectively pointing toward a practical Murdochian moral philosophy.

#### Obedience and Humility

Murdoch writes about attention as an orientation to the reality of the world that is both outside of and more important than the ego-fantasies that otherwise cloud our vision. It is the ability to see what is real that makes one at once obedient and free. She writes that "freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action"; also that "the true artist is obedient to a conception of perfection to which his work is constantly related and re-related in what seems an external manner."<sup>17</sup> Freedom is not license to see whatever one wishes to see; rather, freedom is release from fantasy that obscures what is real. The true artist and the truly moral person must each submit to the reality of the world outside him or herself. This is the (beginning of the) obedience to which Murdoch refers. Obedience in moral life means not fighting irrationally with what cannot be changed; it means not refusing to see the limitations that circumstance imposes on one's options; it means understanding the role played by moral luck in our choices and interactions. Obedience,

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17. Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 65 and 61.

paradoxically, will become the ground for genuine moral agency: only by training one's attention and expanding one's moral vision so that one is able to see what is really the case, and to see it as it is and not first or exclusively as what it is to and for the person seeing—only so submitting one's vision to what is real can a person develop genuine moral authority.<sup>18</sup>

Obedience to reality engenders a powerful humility in the moral agent. Clifton leads off his article with a quotation from Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace*: "A great many people do not feel with their whole soul that there is all the difference between the destruction of a town and their own irremediable exile from that town."<sup>19</sup> Clifton explains Weil's provocative statement by claiming that "the reason people think in this way [according to Weil], is that their 'sense of reality' is 'insufficient,' that they are victims of an attachment to things of the world so deeply felt that they can't perceive anything without perceiving it as 'something perceived by me.'"<sup>20</sup> Recall again Mr. Ramsay observing his wife just before their walk (discussed in chapter three): Mr. Ramsay saw his wife as essentially separate from him and unreachable by him. He saw her solitude and her sadness and her fundamental individuality and he knew that there was nothing he could do to reach her. "And again he would have passed her without a word had she not, at that very moment, given him of her own free will what she knew he would never ask,

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18. Beauvoir, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard all offer accounts of the moral life of the individual that touch on aspects of what I, through Murdoch, argue.

19. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 59; quoted in Clifton, "Murdochian Moral Perception," 210.

20. Clifton, "Murdochian Moral Perception," 210.



and called to him and taken the green shawl off the picture frame, and gone to him.”<sup>21</sup>

Mr. Ramsay’s acknowledgment of his wife’s inner solitude made it possible for him to see her as an individual apart from her relationship to him. In that moment, he perceived his wife as a sovereign self and not as “something perceived by [him].”

In that moment, by suppressing his desire to see her as balm for his wounded ego, Mr. Ramsay saw his wife as a person apart from his attachments to her. By showing Mr. Ramsay’s act of perceiving his wife, the novel reveals a humility in Mr. Ramsay that other characters rarely see. Clifton writes that “the humble man is the kind ‘most likely of all to become good’ because of his self-abnegation, which opens up possibilities for displaying attention toward the world. Thus Murdochian moral perception is the selfless seeing of the world, resulting from moral effort and the taking up of the information gained by such seeing into the moral decision-making process.”<sup>22</sup> Mr. Ramsay suppressed his desires for comfort and connection in order to see his wife in her radical separateness. Because he saw her selflessly and demanded nothing, Mrs. Ramsay was able to offer herself freely to him and to respond to his unspoken needs. Mr. Ramsay’s vision of his wife can then be interpreted as the product, or result, of real moral effort: “The seeing itself is a moral achievement, because ‘the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self.’”<sup>23</sup> And Mr. Ramsay’s

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21. Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, 65.

22. Clifton, “Murdochian Moral Perception,” 212.

23. *Ibid.*, 211.

moral exertion and accomplishment are examples of inner (invisible) moral activity the practice and product of which must be kept silent for their preservation.<sup>24</sup>

The humility that attends the relinquishment of ways of seeing that unduly privilege or prioritize one's self and one's pet projects is among the ineffable moral practices and achievements that are part of invisible moral life and uncodifiable moral vision. Murdoch stresses the presence of humility and obedience in expanding moral vision, arguing that learning to see what is real just because it is real is a moral achievement and that it makes possible real moral goodness. I agree and stress that the attitude of humility that accompanies this clear seeing is also unsayable. The silence that is a part of humility must not be missed.

Murdoch writes that "the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a kind of suppression of self."<sup>25</sup> It is the suppression of self that marks humility. In his recent article, "Murdochian Moral Perception," W. Scott Clifton emphasizes the direct relationship between clear seeing and "unselfing." Murdoch's required "suppression of self" should not be misconstrued as the devaluing of self, self-hatred, or an endorsement of a kind of normative conformity that eliminates individual preference and personality. Rather, as Clifton explains, "the act of unselfing [involves]

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24. This does not mean that Woolf is immoral to write fictional characters who display such attention and insight. It does mean that a real person in a situation like Mr. Ramsay's would diminish the moral worth of his or her attention by pointing it out or by talking about it. Drawing attention to an act of self-suppressing, ego-relinquishing humility would prove the absence of real humility.

25. Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 64.

the breaking free of personal fantasy, and engaging in attention aimed at the world.”

Unselfing means divesting oneself of “irrational concerns for the self” and taking on a new “attitude toward the self—namely, that the self doesn’t deserve the amount of concern we naturally feel toward it.”<sup>26</sup> This means that “unselfing” and “suppression of self” lead unexpectedly to an appropriate valuing of the actual self that one is.<sup>27</sup>

Margaret Holland puts it this way: “What is distinctive about moral attention is that it seeks to take in what is independent and not of its own making. So, when one is attentive, one limits the exercise of one’s agency. Murdoch discusses this aspect of attention as “obedience.””<sup>28</sup> Obedience is merely the ability to attend what is real and to submit one’s vision to that reality. For Murdoch, both artists and virtuous persons are characterized by the same kind of obedience: In “The Idea of Perfection,” “virtue is *au fond* the same in the artist as in the good man in that it is a selfless attention to nature.”<sup>29</sup> In “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” “It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. It is also clear that in moral situations a similar exactness is called for.”<sup>30</sup>

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26. Clifton, “Murdochian Moral Perception,” 214.

27. I could go deep into Beauvoirean existentialism here, and suggest that unselfing is approximately equivalent to making oneself a lack of being in order that there be being. But I won’t do that.

28. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 309.

29. Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 1971; reprint 2009), 40.

30. Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” 64.

The suppression of self Murdoch requires and Clifton endorses might alternately be termed a relinquishment of ego or of overweening pride. The reasons given for suppressing the self support this interpretation: it is necessary to suppress the self in order to see reality, in order to see clearly. What gets in the way of the clear seeing of reality is personal fantasy, which involves valuing and interpreting events, situations, persons, and objects according to desire and primarily with respect to self. When one is ruled by fantasy, objects, persons, and situations tend to be seen or assessed in terms of utility to self: the car accident on the highway is tragic primarily because it made me late to work and only secondarily because of its effects on those involved; the worth of a jewel increases to the extent that I might wear it; that friend is valuable because she validates all my feelings and makes me feel good about myself—in all these situations, the accident, the jewel, and the friend can be seen primarily as objects that promote or fail to promote self-ish goals and not as deserving of consideration apart from me.

For moral change that is genuine, the ways of relating, valuing, and seeing that comprise one's customary or previous self must become things of the past so that something new can be created in its place. If mother in law M had merely hidden her thoughts about her daughter in law really well and forever, then Murdoch could not have claimed that she had achieved any moral growth. Murdoch's argument about M and D and the inner worth of the moral life rests upon the supposition that M really changed, that she came to actually and truly change her opinion and feelings about D. Part of the silence of self transformation (the silence that is the subject of this chapter) is the silence that attends the process of letting go of (parts of) oneself. M could not have told her friends that she was in the process of reevaluating her opinion of D without having

behaved badly. Lou did not explain to anyone the work she did at the top of Pilgrim Monument when she practiced letting go her claims to her husband and learned, at the same time, to see herself clearly.

Humility is the suppression of self that makes it possible to see what is real for itself and not as a system of constraints on the limitless desires of the ego. The humble self is capable of perceiving reality; perception of reality is the condition for obedience to reality, where obedience means the work of conforming one's desires and projects to reality (rather than interpreting reality so that it supports one's projects). Holland writes that "by invoking obedience, Murdoch indicates that attention involves training the will not to interfere with what is given through the effort of astute discernment."<sup>31</sup> Obedience, in turn, leads to knowledge: "In truth-seeking—an ordinary activity in which we test our knowledge of reality against the world—we attain knowledge."<sup>32</sup>

A practical approach to self-transformation will take the following steps: (1) the relinquishment of ego as a barrier to seeing what is real; (2) the disruption of habitual patterns of perception and action expressed in the breakdown of the normative and descriptive narratives created and perpetuated by the self; (3) ineffability and uncertainty as the newly humble self sifts through the fragments of old narratives while also practicing the art of seeing clearly what is real; (4) following the temporary loss of narrative, the creation of a different self by intentionally and thoughtfully developing new patterns of perception and action that conform to reality rather than to fantasy.

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31. Holland, "Touching the Weights," 309.

32. Heather Widdows, *The Moral Vision of Iris Murdoch* (Ashgate, 2005), 54.

## Alice Koller and Self-Transformation

### Relinquishment of Ego

Sara Maitland observes that the ascetic silence-seekers (who tend to seek deserts of either sand or sea) purpose to let go of self. Most of her examples come from various religious traditions; there is a strong tradition of religious silence and solitude that tends toward the ascetic, so this is not surprising. What is more compelling for this project is the secular ascetic silence-seeking found in Annie Dillard's character Lou Maytree and, more invisibly, in Iris Murdoch's insistence on the diminution of self-preference required for ethical achievement in *Sovereignty of Good*. Dillard's depiction of Lou's moral development follows Murdochian principles so closely the story seems almost made to order as an explication of Murdoch's contributions to moral philosophy. Since *The Maytrees* is a novel, the critic might wonder what benefit there is in explicating a work of abstract philosophy with work of spare fiction: there is yet no proof that moral growth or moral achievement could work in this way. Reading Koller's memoirs with Murdoch and *The Maytrees* is one way to respond to that criticism: Koller experiences genuine moral growth in much the same way as does the fictional Lou Maytree; both the fictional Lou and the real Koller become morally better by recognizing the "fat, relentless ego" as the enemy of (moral) goodness and by attuning themselves to what is real about themselves and about the larger world outside themselves.<sup>33</sup>

Tiredness is what alerts Koller to her need for change. She writes, "I'm tired, from the inside out. Tired of perpetually having to fight for everything: degree, men, jobs,

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33. Iris Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 51.

money. Tired of running after things that always elude me. It has to stop.”<sup>34</sup> She has the idea that if she could just get away from everything, then she could think and possibly figure out what it is she should be doing or how it was that she “managed to muddy it all up.”<sup>35</sup> Koller took herself away from everyone for three months in order to strip herself down to essentials; there was no one there on Nantucket to relate to her in the customary ways that might have made it more difficult to let go of the old ways of being that did not serve.

During her time on Nantucket, Koller began to notice all the rules she unreflectively followed. Every time she became aware of an “ought” or a “should” in her self-dialogue, she examined it and cast it aside, as she was determined to learn what it was she needed and wanted for herself. Many of the rules she noticed and discarded were external rules for character. For example, when she arrived at the cottage on Nantucket, she set about unpacking right away. Partway through her task, she asked herself why it was so important to unpack immediately, before doing anything else. She recognized that the rule was her mother’s, and that she had followed it out of a habit of obedience to her mother, not because she valued immediate unpacking. So she stopped unpacking. On another day, she left with her new puppy to pick up the mail at the post office and stopped because she sensed she had forgotten something. She realized it was lipstick she had forgotten—she had uncharacteristically left the house without any makeup on at all. She seriously considered returning to apply lipstick and then she resolved to continue out

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34. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 2.

35. *Ibid.*, 25.

into town without the makeup she was accustomed to wearing. Many of the rules she recognized and rejected were rules of this type.

She pays attention to such things as rules and habits because she sees them as evidence of her own lack of genuine criteria for evaluation:

Each thing I do during the course of a day is something I've been told to do, or taught to do. I have to replace all of it with what I choose to do. I have to learn how to choose one thing over another, one way of doing something over another way. That means I have to want one thing, or one way, more than another.

My stomach tightens. Want one thing more than another? What will I use as a criterion? I don't know. I know only that I have to uproot all of the old while I'm learning what I want. Tear out every habit, every way of responding to people or to things. Or to ideas. Look at it without mercy and ask: Is this mine? Mine as the specific human being that I am? Do I do the things I do because I'm Alice Koller? Or do I do them for reasons that I don't yet know?<sup>36</sup>

She recognizes that the accretions of habits and patterns that shape her life are not genuinely hers. She has never, she sees, examined her own reasons for retaining them. She is in search of some measure of authenticity, but this is, as I will continue to insist, an authenticity grounded in a reality she does not construct entirely on her own or entirely out of materials she herself has created. The reality Koller discovers is closely connected to the reality to which Murdoch demands obedience: the inner apprehension of truths about one's self and about one's relation to the world outside oneself that cannot be altered without doing damage to self or others. This is not universal truth, truth that applies equally, impartially, and objectively to everyone regardless of gifts or position (like gravity). Neither is it a relativistic, meaningless, shorthand for "I like it; at least for now." Koller wants to find out if there is anything genuinely true in herself. To do this,

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36. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 17.



she experiments with letting go of everything in order to find if there is anything that remains.

### Ineffability

As Koller shed her rules, she found it difficult to write about what it was she was thinking, feeling, and experiencing. Her attempts to write out her process for thinking failed her. Though she intended to keep a journal of each day's events (separate from the typewritten experiments in self-understanding), she found herself unable to journal on some days because there was nothing to record.<sup>37</sup> Her "nothing to record" can be compared favorably to Sara Maitland's experience of being unable to remember what it was that happened during some spaces of silence. At one point Koller wished to write to a friend to let her know that she was beginning to let go of longstanding destructive behaviors and attitudes and to...and to...—she did not know what it was she was beginning to do or whether she was beginning to do anything. She did not yet know (or could not yet decide) what her time and effort meant or could make possible; she could not even articulate it to herself, let alone to her friend. And so she did not write the letter. Like Maitland, Koller found parts of her experiences in solitary and significantly silent self-reflection ineffable. Though Koller does not seek silence as such, her experiences of ineffability are a signal to those who have learned to see silence that silence is part of the work she undertook on the island.

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37. "I'll write two things while I'm here. The journal, which I'll keep on the desk, for saying what happens here, outside. The other pages will come out of the typewriter: whatever I can exact from my memory, whatever I can force myself to fit together." (Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 20)

Koller's retreat into solitude and the work she did there point to the necessity of Lou's recourse to Pilgrim Monument in her path to moral growth. Lou did not leave Provincetown or shut herself up like a hermit in her shack on the dunes. Instead, she climbed the monument most days and during the time she spent at the top she practiced letting go of habits of attachment, self-privilege, and ego. Like Koller, Lou chose a space away from her living space to do the work of self-creation. The work of noticing habits, patterns, second-hand rules, assumptions, and clouded vision requires the kind of silence that solitude offers: this is not work that can be easily undertaken in public. It probably looks, on the outside, (were anyone else to be present) like narcissistic navel-gazing. (This is why memoirs of moral growth are so difficult—Koller comes off more self-indulgent than does Lou exactly because Lou is a fictional character dreamed up by a professional writer of fiction and Koller is a real person who wrote about herself.)<sup>38</sup> Discarding habitual practices just as and just because one notices them would look, to a non-participating observer, probably quite volatile. A person engaged in this kind of work is necessarily unstable and unpredictable. She may also be quite fragile. More effective and ultimately safer to do the work of revolutionizing reflection away from the conforming force of community.

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38. What may appear surprising to the casual reader, or even to a reader looking for an account of solitude, is the amount of space Koller's memoirs (both of them) dedicate to discussions of her dogs. Without the dogs, however, the books would have been still harder to write. Woolf used the lighthouse beam as a "rope" thrown to the reader to make up for the thinness of the plot; Koller's dogs play a similar role in her memoirs. Writing silence is difficult. In her first memoir, we are permitted to be amused to note that the puppy Logos helps to make the account possible. By the writing of the second memoir, she has gained in self and in self-narrative; we may remain amused as we note the names of her second and third dogs, Ousia and Kairos, respectively.

Because of her solitude, Koller was free to break her life extravagantly without the constraints of an audience—no one to worry, wonder, or respond—and so began to learn to trust the self that emerged from the rubble after she had discarded everything she could find to discard. We are reminded of Murdoch's mother-in-law M who changed in her daughter-in-law's absence. Murdoch insists upon D's absence so that we can be sure that the change is wholly in M. Nothing about D has changed to alter M's opinion of her. M's change is solely the effect of the long and careful work of re-evaluation and re-seeing that M undertakes. So too with Koller. She can trust that the changes in her ability to see the world are her own because of her withdrawal from the society of her friends and family and because the silence in which she has cloaked much of her work. The people around her did not change. They continued with their lives as they were. Koller's retreat and her insistence on near-total solitude achieve the same effect as Murdoch's insistence on the removal of D from M's company: it is Koller and M who change the way they see the world and the people in it and the silence in which they work both proves and makes possible the endurance of the change.

#### The Breakdown of Narrative

When Koller removed herself to Nantucket in the middle of winter, she broke out of all the familiar patterns that comprised her life: she left the job she had kept just long enough to save the money to spend the time on the island; she left behind all the friends with whom she spent her time and upon whom she relied for emotional support; she explicitly entertained the possibility of ending the search for a tenure-track professorial career; and she bought a puppy, tentatively but definitely tethering herself to a being not herself. This

is to say, Koller made an abrupt break with her life as she had been living it and with the narrative arc that many of her life patterns had described.

There may be something about the middle of life that brings or prompts the kind of disruptive change that functions as silence.<sup>39</sup> Sara Maitland sought silence just as she lost faith in stories, in narrative storytelling, and this as her marriage dissolved and her children left the house. LeClaire's call to silence arrived not long after her children grew up and left home. Anne Morrow Lindbergh wrote her classic memoir *A Gift from the Sea* in the middle of her life as she approached menopause, her children reached adolescence, and her marriage grew distant. At age 37, Koller looked in the mirror and saw, for the first time, the effects of time and age on her face. She approached the middle of her life and saw behind her a string of unsatisfying love affairs, the completion of her advanced degree, and unrelated, short-term, unskilled jobs; saw before her the repetition of painful and fleeting affairs and of unsatisfying, inadequate, and meaningless jobs. For Koller, there was no actual overarching narrative tying the events of her life together, giving them structure, meaning, and direction. Finally she has the idea that if she could just find some very quiet place, where she could be undisturbed and undistracted, she might be

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39. Interestingly, Alexander Nehamas notes something very similar in his book *The Art of Living*, and, just like all my examples are taken from women's lives, so are his taken from men's lives: "It is only after one has become someone or other, once one realizes that one has already had a life consisting of all sorts of events that appear haphazard, disconnected, imitative, and insignificant, that one can begin to try to put them together and to become not just someone or other but oneself. Montaigne did not begin his project until, at the age of thirty-eight, he decided to abandon his public career. Nietzsche did not resign his position at the University of Basel until he was thirty-five. Foucault did not turn to the care of the self until the last ten years of his life." (p 187).

able to think clearly and find an answer to her pressing questions: “What am I doing?”

“What should I be doing?”<sup>40</sup>

Recall again what Murdoch says about the impossibility of reasoning one’s own way out of habitual patterns of thinking or long-held attachments: “It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is an orientation which will provide an energy of a different kind, from a different source.”<sup>41</sup> Lou Maytree found that she could not simply tell herself that she was not bitter (“stop feeling resentment”), or that she accepted her husband’s withdrawal from their marriage (“stop being in love”). Lou had to practice letting go for a minute at a time. After Cornelius revealed to her her bitterness, she found that she wanted to want to let go; it was months before she could progress to actual wanting to let go and actual letting go. It was the regular practice of re-seeing her estranged husband as a separate, individual, unfathomable human being that made Lou’s reorientation possible.

Koller intuited that she would not be able to think her way toward a plan for her life if she remained in the same city, with the same relationships, and with the same professional constraints. Trying to do that kind of thinking while remaining in place would have been the equivalent of telling herself to “be just” without the reorientation that makes such change possible. Reorientation requires the disruption of patterns whether by addition (going up to Pilgrim Monument to practice peace, like Lou did), or by subtraction (leaving behind all the pieces of one’s life, like Koller did), or some

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40. Alice Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 2.

41. Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” 54.

combination of the two. Patterns and the disruption of patterns are both hallmarks of silence; when the narrative patterns of a person's life are disrupted, the experience of that disruption may also be ineffable, which is a different kind of silence.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the early steps of reorientation may not be clear to the person taking them. It may be the case that this person is not even able to articulate to himself what it is that he is doing. These first steps may then look like a breakdown, an aberration, an uncharacteristic outburst, or retreat.

When writing about her experience on Nantucket, Koller is explicit (if not quite direct) about the necessity of letting go of the patterns and narratives that structured her life up to that point. At thirty-seven years of age, Koller was ashamed to discover that she did not know what it was she wanted for her own reasons; worse, she did not know how to be able to tell whether a desire or value originated in herself or whether it came from someone else: "Want one thing more than another? What will I use as a criterion? I don't know. I only know that I have to uproot all of the old while I'm learning what I want."<sup>43</sup> At this point, Koller has only a negative project for herself. She has taken herself away from her communities and from her jobs, and she is committed to breaking out of old patterns.

The negative project creates the space from which the positive project can later develop. Margaret Holland writes that "Moral attention requires a type of awareness

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42. See chapter three, this dissertation, for a discussion of Bernard Dauenhauer's account of silence. Regarding patterns, the "intervening silence" that produces pacing and rhythm is a silence that makes patterns possible; destroying a pattern creates an absence which may become filled by a different kind of pattern. The experience of the absence may resist discourse.

43. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 17.

about oneself that is quite specific and individual (i.e., I must be aware of my prejudices, my weaknesses, etc.), combined with a general awareness that one's traits and pre-dispositions influence how one sees the world. One must make an effort to keep one's inclinations and prejudices from distorting one's vision if one is going to see clearly some independent reality."<sup>44</sup> This is precisely what Koller sets out to do, even if she does not call it a moral project or moral attention: "I've arrived at the outermost edge of my life by my own actions. Where I am is thoroughly unacceptable. Therefore I must stop doing what I've been doing. And I can't stop doing it until I know what I do."<sup>45</sup>

Neither of Koller's self-recording projects go as planned. She feels fragmented; she runs out of the room to escape the task of interrogating and integrating her memory; she neglects the journal.<sup>46</sup> She tries several methods for learning to see the patterns she has created with her life in her attempt to approach her own life philosophically. By writing it out, not as a story, but as a phenomenological investigation, she hopes to become able to see the patterns that have led her to this point in her life. Since she is adept at examining philosophers' arguments, she reasons she can examine her own life as though it were a series of propositions and claims that can be tested and, if unsound, then rejected.<sup>47</sup>

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44. Holland, "Touching the Weights," 308–09.

45. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 17.

46. *Ibid.*, 25–26; 60–61.

47. *Ibid.*, 33.

The first half of *An Unknown Woman* charts her via negativa, her deliberate undoing, her rejection of nearly all her own characteristic behaviors. While she lets go of her (old) self, there is no narrative to which she can anchor her understanding of the experience. She recognizes the absence of narrative meaning when she tries to write a letter to a dear friend:

I put down the glass and try to write again, but my fingers stay unmoving on the keys. I don't want to write it...to write it, I have to find a beginning, a middle, and an end. But there's no end yet, and I don't know whether I'm in the middle or whether I've just begun. I can't simply plunge her in where I started....No. I can't write to her about this. Nor then about anything else.<sup>48</sup>

Her experience of her project remains inexpressible while she remains in the middle of it. During the process of letting go (or unbinding, as she will call it in her later book, *Stations of Solitude*), her thoughts, words, and actions appear to her to be random and untethered to anything.<sup>49</sup> Until she can gain some perspective or learn something new, there is very little to say about what she is doing in a way that will make sense to her as she writes it or in a way that will make sense to someone outside the process. Koller's inability to put into words what she is doing at the time of the doing is related to (though not quite the same as) Sara Maitland's experiences during her forty-day silent retreat. Maitland does not retreat in order to dismantle her life; her life has already been pruned by separation from her husband and an empty nest. However, Maitland does have experiences that defied explanation while they happened and that were difficult to remember properly afterward.

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48. Ibid., 120.

49. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 106.



Koller's inability to write to her friend, her failures to record her daily activities in her journal, and the difficulty with which she wrote her falling-apart point to two different aspects of silence. Her unsought reticence reinforces the argument throughout this dissertation that claims that silence itself resists expression: a (fully) written-about silence is filled and thus broken. It also points to the silences of middles. Alexander Nehamas correctly points out that "self-fashioning always begins in the middle."<sup>50</sup> The middle of a hole makes sense, is understood as necessary to and characteristic of a hole, only when the edges are secure and sensible. Otherwise there would be no hole, only empty space. The middle of an experience, given phenomenologically, pre-narratively, can appear as unintelligible as uncontained space: we understand an experience after the fact, after we have some kind of ending that contains and interprets the middle. We create narratives for our experiences only after we have become able to make sense of the causal connections between events that lead from beginning to middle to end. But during the middle and before the end is in sight, middle does not look like middle-ness, but rather like unintelligible emptiness. Experiences of middles before they are understood to be middles are necessarily experiences that defy expression because any expression that can be given will sound like non-sense. The closest approximation will be the negative language of emptiness and destruction, which is what Koller had to hand; even so, at the time of the experience, what turned out to be a middle felt like an end, and so she came

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50. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 187.

very close to committing suicide. Perhaps this is a very dramatic possible consequence of attempting to interpret a middle experience from the midst of the middle.

#### Recovery (or Creation) of Self

In Koller's experience, learning to see what is real and to know it for reality began with a negative project in which she stripped away all that she could of her habits, beliefs, values, rules, desires, and wishes in order to see what, if anything remained. Having let go of all of her borrowed purposes and unexamined principles, she reaches the point where living and dying hang in equal balance and begins seriously to contemplate suicide. The "small shuddering self" she is left with knows just two things: that she loves her puppy, Logos, and must have him with her; and that the ocean matters to her.<sup>51</sup> She acknowledges these two things as all the self she has and decides, tentatively, that she can begin with just those things. Whether or not other things were to follow from the acknowledgment of her fledgling self, those two things were sufficient for her, at that time, to put off the deliberate choice to die.

Having put off the decision to kill herself, Koller begins to see her life very differently. She uses the two things that constituted her nascent self as the foundation for imagining a future for herself. Playing with her dog at the beach the morning after she put off suicide, Koller decides that however she chooses to fill all the days that stretch before her, the things she choose must give her "the same sense of whatever-it-is that being with Logos gives [her], that walking along the ocean gives [her]. Closeness. Fitting.

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51. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 211.

Belonging.”<sup>52</sup> This is the beginning of Koller’s recovery or creation of self. She does not immediately have words for what it is she feels when she is with her puppy or when she is near the ocean, but she comes to trust that those feelings are genuine, stable, and worth seeking. She tries words and some of them fit. Those words are the beginning, provisional criteria and vocabulary with which she will build her life.

In *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland noted that silence can both dissolve and distill the self. The Desert Fathers and Mothers sought silence and solitude in the desert to dissolve the rigid constructs of the self that obstruct communion with God. Artists of the Romantic period sought the sublime silence (and sometimes solitude) of the mountains and forests to reinforce the boundaries of the self against the demands of society in order to create strong artworks.<sup>53</sup> Though Koller is neither an ascetic nor a Romantic, she experiences some of each of these experiences of silence: she dissolved the sham self she had carried through the world for her first thirty-seven years and in so doing, distilled herself to what she found to be essential. Having found the essentials, she began to build an entirely new life.

### **Improvisation and Self-Creation**

After Koller made her provisional decision to live, her approach to living changed radically. She “felt a peculiar sense of newness”; she decided that “from now on, [her] whole existence will be a special occasion.”<sup>54</sup> It is at this point that she begins to

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52. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 212.

53. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, 234–5.

54. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 214; 212

improvise her life; that she comes to be in a position somewhat analogous to that of Maggie Verver in *The Golden Bowl*. As Martha Nussbaum discusses in *Love's Knowledge*, for moral maturity, Maggie has to learn to make choices and commit to actions that are difficult, imperfect, and risky. She has to learn how to be guided by ideal principles in a messy, non-ideal world in order to love people who are themselves not perfect. Koller's improvised life is quite different from Maggie's, but what they share is the centrality of attention, imagination, surprise, and risk. Koller writes,

The sense of newness now is that the script is gone. I *find* myself thinking. I find myself talking. My words don't follow a prearranged pattern. They surprise me, even as I speak or think. Their unexpectedness catches my own attention, and, examining them, I discover what I *mean* to say.<sup>55</sup>

By attending to her own words and thoughts, Koller is able to surprise herself with her new capacity for imagination. As she imagines her way toward a new reality, she can dare, can risk to realize it because she now has her own self to put on the line.

### **Imagination and Self-Creation**

Imagination, as described by Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch, is the capacity for projecting reality into the future; it is the ability to see one's self in a real future time; it helps to make possible the after-the-fact narrative understanding of past events by positing a before-the-fact provisional narrative hypothesis about the future. Holland quotes Simone Weil as writing that "Even to dwell in imagination on certain things as possible...is to commit ourselves to them already...we believe that thought does not commit us in any way, but it alone commits us, and license of thought includes all

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55. *Ibid.*, 215.

license.”<sup>56</sup> Weil’s focus is different from Murdoch’s and from mine, but the point of these words remains relevant: the quality of our imaginative attention changes our perception of reality. This beginning imaginative work may be private, unvoiced, and, at its origins, unvoice-able.

The silence of the work of imagination is thus necessary and at once filled with possibility and fraught with risk: The process of reorienting one’s attention so as to see reality clearly and then submit obediently to it begins with an imaginative shift. Much depends upon the process and result of the original change in the patterns of the imagination. Weil notes that one must accept the possibility of evil, but that dwelling on it, according it too much weight or space, makes evil into a dominant pattern of the mind and, like colored glasses, informs the manner in which future seeing and acting will be carried out.<sup>57</sup> Koller nearly failed to achieve the shift from unreal fantasy to reality-based imagination and so came very close to ending her life. If one does not have a firm grasp on what is real, then attempting this step in solitude may fail entirely or fail to produce lasting or beneficial results. Thus, Lou was saved from her faulty sense of what was real by a friend who saw better than she could where her attention was. Once Lou was made to see what was true or real, she was able to begin the work of reorientation on firmer footing.

Shifting or expanding one’s attention to what is real is the beginning of a process that yields an expanded vision of one’s self that remains grounded in reality. This is (at

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56. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 307.

57. *Ibid.*

least) one way of orienting oneself toward transformation. Koller began attending to what is real by first identifying what was not real. For many years, Koller spent her energies on unsatisfying and fleeting romantic relationships, and her feelings of powerlessness in those relationships were among the factors motivating her to retreat from her life and think in solitary quietness. As she learns to pay attention to herself, she begins to see how much of her life has been structured by fantasy:

Yesterday...I even considered what it would be like to have Mike here. As though the option were mine. As though he were very much alive in my life, there to be phoned or written to. But he's not. I make myself say it out loud: "Mike is not available to me. Mike doesn't exist for me." I'm not sure what I've just said.<sup>58</sup>

This is a decisive moment in which she lets go of fantasy to (begin to) live in reality.

Koller first identifies what is not real and even names it aloud. At this point she cannot see what it is she is doing; the silence here is not a physical silence but a disruptive, pattern-breaking silence. At the time that Koller makes this statement, it feels to her as though it were meaningless, murky, incomprehensible; after the fact, it becomes a revelation, one of her first moments of clear vision.

Reality first encountered may not feel real, may not be seen as real to the person accustomed to privileging fantasy. One notices and understands things according to narrative and pattern; the way we see informs the way we can see. Holland notes that "one is inclined (or disinclined) to notice certain things in one's surroundings, not necessarily because they stand out in an objective sense but because they fit a pattern of

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58. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 77. See also pages 85 and 86 where she says the same about Stan and George: "They are not possibilities"; also page 161: "Maybe if I just say it over and over again, out loud, I'll hear how ridiculous it is: I don't know which of two men I want to marry when neither of them has ever asked me, nor likely ever will."

interests that one brings to the situation.”<sup>59</sup> If a person has no criteria for seeing what is real, and if in the absence of criteria generates explanatory and future-oriented narratives woven of fantasy, fact, and desire, then reality, even when apprehended, will have to be either badly understood or rejected because reality will not fit the pattern of interests that structure experience. Murdoch puts it this way:

Knowledge informs the moral quality of the world, the selfish self-interestedly casual or callous man *sees* a different world from that which the careful scrupulous benevolent man sees; and the largely explicable ambiguity of the word ‘see’ here conveys the essence of the concept of the moral. The connection between ethics and epistemology is something which we are intuitively grasping all the time in our non-philosophical lives.<sup>60</sup>

As Koller divests herself of fantasy, she begins to attend the patterns of reality, and these appear to her to be nearly incomprehensible. She writes,

I can’t see: I don’t know how to describe the situations in which I find myself, in which I place myself. I can’t hear: I don’t know how to understand the purposes of people, of special people, of men, in relation to me. I can’t feel: I don’t know how to recognize what goes on inside me, what my own purposes are, or even whether I have any that are my own.<sup>61</sup>

Not seeing, not hearing, and not feeling are Koller’s first steps toward seeing, hearing and feeling. It would take a little time before patterns—first small and then increasingly larger—would emerge from the limitless reality she was only beginning to face. Once the patterns began to emerge, Koller became able to create patterns of her own that remained rooted in what is real.

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59. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 305.

60. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 177.

61. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 148.

With regard to moral transformations more generally, it is reasonable to suppose that a similar process must be undergone. I quoted Margaret Holland on patterns and attention above; she does extend her point to the moral realm: “Interests (even when they are unrelated to the moral sphere) are apt to make one notice occurrences related to them; some of these occurrences will be of a moral nature. Therefore one’s interests are likely to influence one’s moral perception.”<sup>62</sup> Moral life cannot be conceived of as distinct and separable from all other parts of life; rather, if “moral attention might be described as inner moral work which seeks to improve the quality of perception of independent reality”—a claim that faithfully interprets Murdoch—then perceiving accurately is itself a moral achievement, and the attention that makes possible every interest is itself unmistakably moral.<sup>63</sup> Murdoch herself does claim this more explicitly: “Serious reflection is *ipso facto* moral effort and involves a heightened sense of value and a vision of perfection.”<sup>64</sup> Clifton’s reading of Murdoch agrees with Holland but better embraces Murdoch’s drama. He writes, “The seeing itself is a moral achievement because ‘the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true’; and ‘the moral achievement isn’t in really seeing persons, it’s in the unselfing, the really seeing whatever is before us. This includes...everything.’”<sup>65</sup>

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62. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 305.

63. Holland, “Touching the Weights,” 310.

64. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 437.

65. Clifton, “Murdochian Moral Perception,” 211; 219.



“Unselfing” and letting go of fantasy are required preconditions for seeing “whatever is before us.” The experience of that gap between letting go and seeing what is real is grossly undertheorized in moral philosophy (as the beginning of my last chapter tried to make plain). Alice Koller’s record of her experience of doing the work of breaking free from self-ish fantasy and orienting herself toward the actual real world and all its inhabitants provides a theorizable glimpse into that silence. Discussing it here breaks one superficial silence but leaves unharmed the deeper, morally worthy silence. The superficial silence is, of course, the paucity of philosophical work that addresses exactly what happens between letting go or stopping A and taking up or doing B. The silence that remains intact is the silence that really does break the narrative understanding of self and world, observable in such statements as “I can’t see, hear, or feel” or “I don’t know how to listen to my own words” or “I can’t write to her about this. Nor then about anything else.”<sup>66</sup>

### **Achieving Clear Vision**

Clifton acknowledges that “this breaking free requires a struggle, however, and is often painful.”<sup>67</sup> Given the difficulty and the pain that attend the process of moral transformation, might it be the case that some people are so damaged, so already-wounded, that they cannot make this shift? Lisa Tessman considers the intersection of constitutive moral luck, feminist politics of liberation, and virtue ethics as it bears on self-transformation. She offers as an example the condition of women whose dispositions

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66. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 148; 138; 120.

67. Clifton, “Murdochian Moral Perception,” 212.

have been so warped or damaged by systems of oppression that they either find their instinctive desires to be in conflict with their carefully chosen principles, or that their best moral achievements are what she terms “burdened virtues.”<sup>68</sup> Robust virtue, on Tessman’s account, may not be available to those who have been subject to systemic, constitutive, bad moral luck. Whether or not Tessman is correct about this, her claims nevertheless pose an important objection for my project: Is it oppressive to say that lasting moral transformation and self-creation is an option available to everyone? Is my project and are the arguments and art on which my project rests oppressively privileged?

Tessman says that “the idea of moral luck makes it clear that one does not have complete control over the constitution of one’s own character.”<sup>69</sup> We do not and cannot choose the families or societies into which we are born. We do not and cannot choose the teachers, formal and informal, we will have in our earliest years. Much of our earliest formation is purely a matter of luck. Some fare better than others, morally speaking, in worse circumstances, and some fare worse than others in better circumstances, but even those natural tendencies toward moral superiority or inferiority are, in our early years, largely matters of circumstance, which is to say, luck. I agree with Tessman on this count.

Tessman continues,

if the way in which one’s character is formed and how much it can be changed is subject to moral luck, particularly the bad luck of being affected by systems of oppression that can damage one’s self by creating conflicts between one’s

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68. See Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

69. Lisa Tessman, “Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation,” *Social Theory and Practice* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 389.

dispositions and one's own liberatory principles, then one cannot just *will* one's dispositions to change.<sup>70</sup>

I agree here as well, following Murdoch: we cannot simply will our own dispositions to change, and we cannot reason ourselves into love or justice. For change to occur we must be redirected, and that redirection cannot come purely from reason or will.<sup>71</sup> It must strike us from outside, coming even as a surprise, or as a momentary revelation of what is real that makes possible a method and goal for re-evaluation not previously seen. Lou was surprised by Cornelius's perception of the bitterness she did not know she possessed. Koller was surprised by the implications of an excuse she had long used: exhausted by the meaningless, repeating patterns of dead-end jobs and relationships, Koller longed to get away and think. "But I have no money," she reminded herself, prepared to ignore that desire. Then something in what she said surprised her:

Suddenly I stand quite still and listen to the echoes of my sentence: "I have no money." Something about it is trying to get through to me. I always say I have no money. It's true, of course. I've never had enough money to do anything but feed and shelter myself... Well, *would* I go somewhere to think if I had the money? Is it only the money that's stopping me? All right, I'll *get* the money.<sup>72</sup>

Later, Koller will note that she did not know how to listen to her own words; this experience of listening to what it was she said, which occurred before she began the process of unmaking and remaking her character and her life, was the initial surprise that set in motion the reorientation of which Murdoch writes.

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70. Tessman, "Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation," 376.

71. Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good,'" 54.

72. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 2–3.

Can one prepare for the surprise, the “tip,” as Nussbaum calls it?<sup>73</sup> It certainly seems contradictory to suggest that one could orchestrate one’s own surprise. Though there would be no surprise if one could design and set in motion the catalyst for reorientation entirely by oneself, the Murdochian response might be that one ought to cultivate one’s attention and let the surprise take care of itself. That is the thing that one can do, practically speaking, in order to become able to be surprised by what is real in such a way that one can see, as for the first time, what it is that one is or that one does and, knowing it, begin to evaluate and even change it.

Appealing to Murdochian perception even helps to strengthen Tessman’s own points. Tessman, relying on arguments put forth by Margaret Urban Walker and Claudia Card, writes that “taking responsibility in this forward-looking sense can create opportunities for one to grow, morally speaking, since ‘we develop responsibility as a virtue by first *taking* responsibility in ways that outrun our apparent present worthiness to do so and then carrying through successfully.’”<sup>74</sup> What drops out of the account Tessman gives for the way moral growth happens is the moment of recognition that must occur before the taking on of a new responsibility. One must first see the new responsibility as one that, difficult and possibly unattainable as it might be, is one toward which one might nevertheless strive. One must first see one’s future self, even if only momentarily and hazily, as one that can be responsible in this new way. In order to so see oneself in these

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73. Refer back to chapter 5; Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge*, 160.

74. Tessman, “Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation,” 381. The internal quoted material is from Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 27.

ways, one must learn to become attentive both to the external world with all its imperfections and unmet, overwhelming needs and also to one's inner self, one's motivations, desires, and aversions; attention to self and to the world outside one's self make it possible to pay attention to the surprises that can spark orientation and reorientation toward what is real and what is good. Holland says the same thing in a slightly different way: "Moral attention moves in two directions, inward toward oneself and outward toward an aspect of independent reality. It involves a struggle in both directions: an effort to set aside dispositions which would distort perception and an effort to see what is independent of oneself."<sup>75</sup>

So Tessman worries that genuine virtue may be unattainable to some people or groups of people because they will have been so thoroughly oppressed so as not to have been able to develop healthy virtues. Instead, only burdened or deformed virtues will be available when virtue is available at all; sometimes only continence (*enkrasia*) will be available. She gives several examples: She offers Sandra Bartky's hypothetical woman "P" whose feminist principles war against her masochistic sexual fantasies. She mentions as well various "pride" movements that aim, in her view, to "[change] internalized forms of racism or homophobia, which are socially formed character traits"—if a person proves unable to abandon or transform one's self-directed racism or homophobia, then the project of the pride movements will have failed, at least with respect to such a person, and the failure will rest upon the inability of the movement to effect the transformation at which it aims. And she suggests, with Claudia Card, that a woman committed to feminist

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75. Holland, "Touching the Weights," 309.

liberatory principles and values who nevertheless displays (and sees herself as displaying) a tendency to traits associated with oppression, such as misplaced gratitude, fear of standing out, being strong, or “so called female masochism,” will suffer the moral and emotional pain of being badly integrated.<sup>76</sup> For Tessman, (and for Card and Bartky, according to Tessman), these are failures in character formation and in virtue attainment that demonstrate the constitutive unavailability of genuine virtue for those who are oppressed by constitutive, systemic, bad moral luck.

I think a gentler and more hopeful view of character development, moral change, and virtue attainment is available, which is not to say it is painless, easy, or without real danger. It is to say that it is possible and that it requires very little by way of material goods; on the other hand, it may be true that a philosopher will be best able to accomplish the work. Murdoch writes “what moves us—our motives, our desires, our reasoning—emerges from a constantly changing complex; moral change is the change of that complex, for better or worse.”<sup>77</sup> In order to change one’s character, one must be able to see what it is one is and does, and this is just what Koller sets out to do. She writes: “Where I am is thoroughly unacceptable. Therefore I must stop what I am doing. *And I*

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76. Tessman, “Moral Luck in the Politics of Personal Transformation,” 388, 379, and 383. I cannot address Tessman’s argument as fully as I might like because that address falls outside the scope of this chapter and of this project. I use her work in order to bring up the question whether or not silence itself and silence in the context of moral transformation is available to anyone, or whether I am revealing a position of moral privilege in my arguments. She herself does not discuss silence; I cannot here give a full account of what a virtue ethics can or cannot do with regard to oppression and privilege.

77. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 300.

*can't stop doing it until I know what I do.*"<sup>78</sup> Koller has to begin by learning to see herself, and, as Clifton points out, "the seeing itself is a moral achievement."<sup>79</sup>

Although Koller had the advantages of elite education and sharp intelligence, both of which are examples of good moral luck, she had disadvantages in disposition and circumstance that constituted bad moral luck as well. Her relationship with her mother was a highly toxic one and the toxicity of that relationship was invisible to her until she was well into adulthood; she did not realize the extent of the anger, pain, and sadness she felt at not having a mother that loved or supported her in any way, and the pain of her misfortune in her familial situation informed the kinds of friendships and romantic relationships that she formed for many years.

Koller was bright enough to study philosophy at the doctoral level at a prestigious university in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time when there were even fewer women in the profession than there are currently. Though her education was sound, her prospects were bleak because no one offered her the kind of mentoring that was made available to the men in her program, and she was naively ignorant of her need. She writes about not having been clued in to the unofficial networking and apprenticing that ensured the jobs of her peers. This is another example of systemic bad luck.

When Koller took herself away to Nantucket, she brought with her all her accretions of bad luck, privilege, and incomplete virtues, and she learned, first, to see what it is that she did—to see herself. Second, she subjected what she learned about what

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78. Koller, *An Unknown Woman*, 17. My emphasis.

79. Clifton, "Murdochian Moral Perception," 211.

it is she was and did to careful scrutiny, asking about every new thing she learned whether it was a rule or value or desire that (a) was given to her by some untrustworthy other, and so could be rejected until or unless she decided, for herself, to take it back up; or (b) was rooted in unreality, in fantastical wishing that was always and would always be untethered from any state of affairs that was actually the case. Any items that could be filed under either (a) or (b) she rejected so that she could learn to see what it was that she herself was, felt, thought, and valued. Breaking apart the self in this way is painful, as Koller's experience shows. It is difficult, too, as ought to be apparent. But it is also possible, even possible for persons who have not enjoyed thorough good moral luck. Relinquishing one's ego whether simply to learn to experience silence for itself, or to learn to see reality more clearly, or as part of an intentional process of self formation, does not guarantee moral excellence, at least not in the sense of ensuring that one will achieve some minimum or baseline number of moral points that might allow one to level up, so to speak. Learning how to see reality, how to see what is real, is simply part of what is required for moral life—how can you respond to a moral situation if you cannot first see it? Seeing clearly is a moral achievement every time. Transformation is possible because at every moment it is possible to see, even if for the first time, what is really true—at any moment it is possible to be surprised by reality. Reality itself can be the external source for the reorientation that makes it possible to be other than that which we have been.

### **Conclusions**

To conclude in a responsible fashion, permit me to review all that has happened so far. Silence is a real phenomenon. Its manifestations and meanings change through time and



vary according to culture and context. Silence is a part of artistic experience: the creation of any particular artwork depends as much upon the “content” as it does upon the silence that frames it; silence can be conveyed through artworks, as when unvoiced thoughts are narrated to the reader, or when the reader is denied some piece of information made visible through preterition. Those who seek silence are changed by it, as the memoirs of silence show.

The silences we seek and the silences we create shape our moral lives. Silence can be an expression of love toward other persons. (Silence can be used to punish or oppress as well, but this project excludes from its focus harming silences.) In *To the Lighthouse*, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay each refrained from saying particular utterances out of love for the other person. Their silences did not hide anything: Mrs. Ramsay knew that her husband thought he would have written better books if he had not married just as she knew that he complimented her flower gardens without taking notice of the flowers. She also knew that he made a point to tell her the flowers were “creditable” in order to please her, and she let herself be pleased. Mr. Ramsay, for his part, knew his wife loved him even though she could not say the words, and, to his credit, he let himself feel loved even though he longed to hear the words themselves. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay attended the silences that the other created and maintained as an expression of particular, individual love.

One can certainly step back from the particularity of the novel and claim, too, that generally speaking, all the things we refuse to express in order to be kind, generous, forgiving, or loving—all these silenced utterances have moral worth. That is, that the act of silencing them can be a morally worthy action. Moral philosophy, then, must be able

to accommodate in a clear fashion the inner, private life we cannot share with others without loss of integrity. It would be such a loss of integrity for Mrs. Ramsay to have been goaded into saying the words “I love you,” or to have been pushed to have publicized the details of her romantic life prior to having met Mr. Ramsay. If mother-in-law M had made public her unloving feelings about D, there would have been a diminution of moral value; expressing unjustified catty opinions would be to amplify their meanness; expressing them while “behaving beautifully” in all other respects would be to implicitly endorse falseness and hypocrisy.

Silence shapes those who seek it and practice it. Mrs. Ramsay was known for silence as was Lou Maytree. Garrulous Anne LeClaire softened as a result of developing a ritual of silence; she became a little quieter, more focused, more meditative, and more forgiving of others, and she ties this explicitly to her commitment to making space for silence. Sara Maitland, plunged into a solitude at midlife that fostered, for the first time in her cheerfully noisy life, room for silence, fell in love with silence and sought it intentionally (adopting solitude as something that facilitated silence). She resists moralizing the silence or philosophizing it away, and I respect that greatly. I can say, without damage, that Maitland’s search for silence changed her.

Alice Koller’s example is more striking, possibly because she never set out to find or investigate silence. She did seek solitude, and solitude and silence are closely intertwined. Each carries with it something of the other, even if only faintly. The silence Koller found is evident in its effects: there was, in the middle of her life, a distinct rupture that terminated previous patterns of habits and relationships and, eventually, cleared space for new patterns to develop. The rupture was a period of silence in the narrative of

her life as a whole; in that period of silence, she experienced many of the effects of silence noted by other silence-seekers, including the dissolution and distillation of self; ineffability; and a life reshaped by and toward silence. After Nantucket, Koller's homing instinct was recalibrated and she sought solitary places conducive to silence instead of the cities to which she had previously been drawn.

Where silence is either transformative or an act of love (and it could be both), silence is also clearly linked to attention. It may not require enormous amounts of attention to note some of the more negative manifestations of silence, such as punitive silent treatments. The silences that enable the preservation of a measure of appropriate dignity or the expression of love may easily go unnoticed if one is not attuned to them. If one endures or seeks silence without also learning how to attend to both it and to the response of one's self in it, then silence will either become boring or dangerous. Maitland writes of the slip into madness that is a possible dark consequence of prolonged periods of silence; Koller very nearly commits suicide. Learning to pay attention, learning to see what is real, as Murdoch describes it, can reveal silence and also create the conditions for being taught in and by silence.

Attention to silence as attention to what is real is a moral achievement, and moral achievements should be praised by moral philosophers. This is a work of moral praise for silence. Moral life is characterized by uncertainty and wildness, by tragic failures and by unreasonable brilliance. Moral discourse built on arguments and treatises and propositions and reason can pin for examination much of what is included in moral life; it includes much of what is good and lovable about it. But for the wildness of it, there must be room for silence. Here I have labored to make silence visible, to show a little of what

it can do, and to claim that those functions and activities of silence belong to discussions of moral life. I have suggested that for some kinds of moral expression and moral growth, one must see what one does not see and hear what one does not hear in order to be changed by that about which one cannot speak. It will always be necessary to give reasons or to have them at hand for many kinds of moral judgments and actions, and this dissertation does not question that necessity; my work has only made me more convinced of the place for explicit expression, for frank conversation, and for the dialectic of instruction. When those are sufficiently developed, then it becomes time to tune one's moral ears to unspoken love and one's moral eyes to invisible change for a richer, more complete vision of moral life.

## EPILOGUE

Only now did he reckon that beauty itself was the great thing.

—*The Maytrees*

There is yet one more thing I would say about silence, something I have not been able to say until now, until the very end (quite possibly because saying it depended upon the totality of the picture or the vision I have been at pains to produce): The silences I have described are ever, if paradoxically, relational in nature, by which I mean that they depend for their worth and their beauty upon relationship and community. For all the silences I have considered, silence has made or been a necessary part of what has made relationship both possible and beautiful. Consider, again, Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay from *To the Lighthouse*: The silences they wove into their conversations sustained the loving respect they had for each other. By obscuring some of their inner thoughts, their silences made each a little inscrutable to the other, and that inscrutability, held lovingly, brought each before the other as a subject, as a live autonomous self that could not without damage be reduced to a (perfectly knowable) object.

All of the silences I have discussed are relational. Though I do believe that there are secrets that can be kept without compromising moral ideals or without weakening the moral life, I am not arguing that moral life can or should happen entirely in secret—that would be a kind of solipsistic immoral vacuum. We need, for moral achievement, and for

moral beauty, relationship. For silence, too, we need relationship. Silence depends upon relationship for its moral worth, and that is what I want to clarify in these last pages.

### **Relationships With Others**

Consider the relationships between the characters in the novels: Mr. Ramsay, in particular, learns from Mrs. Ramsay even though she does not say a word to reproach him. He catches the silent hint from her and modifies his behavior—but also without saying “hey, look, I modified my behavior! See!” We need others as silent guides, and much of our moral learning-by-imitation is done, and should be done, without drawing much attention to it. I think of a beautiful attitude or expression a friend carries off and I try to imagine how it would look for me to adopt something similar according to my disposition and situation. This stretches my moral imagination, which is laudable for itself. It also pushes me to be very clear about what my own disposition and situation are, which means that my moral vision or moral perception are sharpened. And most often, these are things done in silence.

Anne LeClaire gets to experiment and practice this way on her silent Mondays. She doesn't see these as experiments in stretching or modifying her conception of virtue until much later (if she does see them as quite this), which helps us to see that one can experiment without trying to do so beforehand. She endures without speaking her friend's silent rage and they both find, to their utter surprise, that the speechlessness that appeared outwardly to produce the rage actually stilled it. Later, she forgets to remember some small hurt her husband caused her on a silent Monday. She realizes that, had it not been one of those Mondays, she'd have lashed out immediately—immediately spoken her hurt

and displeasure and it would have been a real spat. Instead, at the moment in which it happened, she makes a note to bring it up the next day so they can hash it out. The next day, however, she finds that she cannot remember what was said at all, and so the spat goes unfought. —I think we must give LeClaire credit for some real silence here: she must have kept her rage from her expression (at least significantly) when her husband said the annoying thing or he would have (or should have!) backtracked immediately, responded to her visible, if unspoken expressions, etc.

Alice Koller's experience is particularly illustrative of the necessity of relationship to silence in moral life. In solitude, she dismantled her life, examining the habitual behaviors of her relational self as a first step toward living a desirable, intentional life. The habits she noticed and discarded included habits of behavior toward other persons as well as habits of behavior toward herself. When she concluded that she had no self, no life, and no hope for a future life, and so began seriously to consider suicide, she deliberately availed herself of the opinion of other people who could serve as a check to her reasoning. This must not be missed—when silence is taken up as a solitary endeavor before a real self has been won (a self that relates to itself in equilibrium,<sup>1</sup> to be discussed below), then the danger for destruction is very real. Yes, there are many good things to say about silence, and yes, much of the philosophical explorations of moral life

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1. The astute reader is correct to note the implicit influence of Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* here. The Kierkegaardian corpus would indeed be a rich playground in which to explore many of the silences that have been under consideration in this dissertation. I have held myself back from any such serious exploration because it would have been impossible and irresponsible to press Kierkegaard's arguments and style into such an intentionally secular study as this has been. It would be like trying to discuss Shakespeare's history plays while deliberately avoiding any mention of England; or like writing about Homer's *Odyssey* but avoiding all mention of Odysseus.

have focused too exclusively on the communal aspect of moral life. However, I am not here arguing (and I never intend to argue) that the community of moral life is unimportant or optional, only that there is as much moral life taking place invisibly, below the surface and hidden from view as there is taking place visibly and outwardly.

The silences we create and respect in our interactions with others are part of the beauty and risk of morality. Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay preserved in one another the untouchable inner life that cannot ever, no matter how intimate the relationship, be shared or shown completely. That is part of the mystery of human experience, cause for joy and despair: What a relief that no one ever will know my every thought or secret! But oh, how sad that no one will ever know my every thought or secret! Our willingness to permit others their mystery is a gift of silence. We let go of any putative right to know everything about the beloved, let go of projects that fix the beloved in catalogs of facts and data, and learn to allow instead for the possibility (and the risk) of surprise, freshness, something new.

This is why I claim for moral life the silences Bernard Dauenhauer ascribes to artistic projects. Artistic silences involve risk, uncertainty, the very real possibility of failure at every moment, and the hope of unlooked-for wonder and beauty. His description of moral life and the silences therein appears to be a great deal safer—every person simply yields his or her judgment to the imagined omnitemporal court of moral appraisers. One might be wrong, but with such a conception of moral life, one is unlikely to be at risk of having one's heart shattered. And I think that is wrong—I think that it is the very real possibility of heartbreak, of despair, of irretrievable loss as well as of joy, unspeakable beauty, and unsayable gratitude that make moral life compelling at all.



### Relationship of Self to Self

The relational nature of moral life does not mean that a solitary person is necessarily non-moral or that times of solitariness are outside of moral life (outwith moral life?). The relationship one has to one's own self is as real and important a relationship as those one has with other people.

It could be argued that a dominant theme of this dissertation has been the depiction of what it looks like to coincide with one's self or what it looks like to grow into a coincidence with one's self. Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* knew herself to be unable to say the words "I love you" to her husband and also to have those words come out in the right way—with the right tone and with the right warmth and intensity and with the assurance that they conveyed just what she felt of her love toward her husband. So she did not say the words no matter how much Mr. Ramsay pleaded with her to say them. It would not have been right; the love would not have been as freely, richly, and creatively given. Only by knowing her own self so well could Mrs. Ramsay then go on to learn ways of expressing her love so fully that she knew that he knew of it without her having to say the words.

Keeping with the same novel, Lily Briscoe resists Mrs. Ramsay, Charles Tansley, William Bankes, the fashions in painting at the time at odds with her vision (a Fauvist among Impressionists?), and all other distractions and criticisms to paint her vision as she sees it. She is, to use Murdoch's language, obedient to the ideal that hangs above her, and she takes that ideal, her obedience, and the ceaseless goal of striving to approximate that ideal as her task. She works in paint on canvas, Mrs. Ramsay in expressions of marital love, but both create in obedience to an ideal of perfection that requires every energy of

their genuine selves. If either one had known her own self any less well, then their efforts would have failed.

Lou Maytree, mother-in-law M, and Maggie Verver also demonstrate the morally worthy project of relating properly to one's self. Lou Maytree's moral growth began when she began, finally, to "poke around in those terrors and wastes" within her, to "look out for resentment, self-cherishing, and envy. Over years [to form] the habit of deflecting them before they dug in."<sup>2</sup> Lou had avoided having to know, to really know, her dark corners, cobwebby nooks, and murky bottom until she came to a point at which refusing to know meant deliberately to poison herself with increasing bitterness. Faced with two options—bitterness or self-knowledge—she chose her self, and she won from that choice, chosen continually and consistently, a life.

Even Murdoch's bare plot about the mother-in-law finds a place in this pattern, in this theme. M recognizes that temperance and prudence require her to keep from voicing her critical and unjust opinion of her daughter-in-law. Perhaps at first she reasons that propriety dictates that she behave with every appearance of grace but cannot insist that she genuinely love the girl. And so it cannot. But virtue is not satisfied with the appearance of goodness, and though discretion is preferable to coldness and cruelty, it nevertheless makes one, in such a case, into a double agent. And perhaps it was merely tiredness that made the mother-in-law first think that there could be something better than discretion and beautiful behavior. (We are never told what caused the mother-in-law's desire to change her heart.) Tiredness would be sufficient. There are secrets that drain a

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2. Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 86; 93.

person of energy, that are not an honor to bear if one can change the situation that requires the secrecy. If M could come to have no need to keep the secret, then she would be free. Learning to love her daughter-in-law restores M to herself, freeing her from the demands of secrecy and temperance while also freeing her to greater love for D and also for herself.

The most dramatic instance of restoration of self to self belongs to Alice Koller, not least because she is a real human being. When Koller left for Nantucket, she was inscrutable to herself, utterly lacking in self-knowledge. What did she want? What did she need? What could she not live without? She had no answers to these questions. She strips everything away with no other help than years of rigorous philosophical training until both living and dying hold equal value to her. Only then does she finally seek help—only then can she finally do so and trust herself to do it: had she asked for help sooner, she would not have been able to know, for herself, given the way she related to herself for the first thirty-seven years of her life, that the reasons and decision were hers. She talks with two people whose opinions and reasoning and motives she strongly trusts and, when they find her appalling but not mad, she begins to know that she can trust her processes. When she returns home, she finds that her genuine love for her puppy is enough to warrant a stay of (self-)execution and she builds a life from there. Koller goes on to build a life grounded on self-knowledge and desire, but for that it is not a selfish life in a pejorative sense. It is a life that is full with her own self, and one characterized by a great deal of solitude. The self she develops after divesting herself of the false faces behind which she previously related to others and to the world is a self that can, because it is so rich in self, relate to others freely and genuinely.

The development of self I discuss here and throughout my chapters is a development that happened primarily in silence. There is, first, the disruptive silence that breaks old patterns in order to make room for new ones. When a person is in the middle of such a disruptive silence—when one is between patterns of being—it might be the case that there is or seems to be nothing at all to say. Koller, for example, abandoned her attempts at letter-writing once she had descended pretty far into her stripping-away project: she had gotten far enough to have lost the old habitual patterns but she had not yet come to a place where anything new had come to take their place. All there was to say was nothing (which is not quite the same as having nothing to say unless it is made clear that she had “nothing” to say).

There is also the very prosaic silence of inner growth, mentioned above as the invisible counterpart to visible moral action and deliberation. If a horticultural metaphor might be permitted, then roots are just as important (if less showy and less lovely) as are leaves and flowers. (And it will not do, if one is gardening, to pull up a growing plant in order to investigate the health of the roots. If the plant flowers and produces its seeds, etc., then it may be presumed that the roots are indeed healthy. One does not water the buds or the leaves, but instead aims for the roots—that is where care must be directed for growth to take place.)<sup>3</sup> When a person is genuinely changing or developing, then no matter how much visible outward change others can notice and discuss, there will be still more happening internally that does not lend itself easily to discussion.

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3. The irony of my naturalistic horticultural metaphor, so decried in chapter one, is not at all lost on me.

### Relationship of Self to God

The relationship between one's self and the others that comprise one's community and the relationship one has within one's self are mutually dependent upon each other. There is a third relationship that creeps into the pages about silence here, and that is the relationship that one has or might have with God. Sara Maitland lives in solitude on the Scottish moor, but the relationship she has with herself in silence and solitude is not the only morally implicated relationship. It is impossible to talk about the silence Maitland seeks without also at least mentioning the God she seeks in and through her silence—impossible because her relationship with God is among the defining features of her life and to dismiss it would be to falsify her experience.

I wanted to determine how far one could go in seeking silence before it became impossible to avoid God and the answer is, I think, quite far. I think I am vindicated in my initial hypothesis that silence is a human experience and human phenomenon and that one need not be religious to produce or respect silence, or to create with and within silence.<sup>4</sup> But I now begin to wonder—and this is a project for another time—whether the search for silence does not bring one to the search for God. Koller is in many ways the outlier for this study as Koller never set out to seek silence: she set out to find out whether or not she could have or be or become a self and I have argued that what she did revealed and produced silence. If Koller had determined to find silence I wonder what she would have found.

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4. I must, of course, leave to entire silence, the question of whether the extremely human capacity for experiencing silence is an implicit acknowledgment of the human capacity for relationship with God. I recognize that an argument of this kind could be made, and this recognition is sufficient for this dissertation.

Maitland was already a devoted Catholic before her quest for silence and that quest deepened and enriched what was already there. Max Picard, the reader may recall, also already had a strong Catholic faith that underscored his philosophical essay into the nature of silence. Anne LeClaire, however, never thought of herself as a particularly religious person. For many years people asked her whether her regular speechless Mondays were a spiritual practice and for many years she answered that no, they were not. As time passed and she continued her practice, she began to wonder about different spiritual traditions and to sort out her feelings about spirituality and religion. She does not say that she has found God but she now insists that there is a presence she feels, mystery she cannot comprehend, and a soul that transcends. Now she freely admits that her Mondays are a spiritual practice.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly LeClaire's experience cannot be universalized. It remains the case that avoiding God when looking for accounts of non-harmful or beneficial silences is difficult. This is not the place to speculate about the reasons for that difficulty, so I will pass over such speculation with my own preteritive silence and leave that investigation to future inquiry. For now it will be sufficient to say that, morally speaking, if one is going to pursue silence itself with any kind of intention, then one ought to be prepared to have to think about one's spiritual life in some fashion. This, of course, is also implicated in one's relationship with one's self.

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5. Anne D. LeClaire, *Listening Below the Noise: The Transformative Power of Silence* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 200–03.

### Silence and Virtue

The silence that covers or makes room for self growth and the silence that expresses or covers the development or achievement of some virtue are not, I don't think, two different silences. I think they represent a tension in moral life between being and becoming, having and coming to have. Lou spent twenty years learning to look for self-cherishing and resentment and rooting them out before they could take hold, and as a result, when her betrayers returned after their twenty year absence she found herself able to welcome them with love. (Whether or not we think such forgiveness and such love to be plausible is genuinely beside the point, though I confess it never occurred to me that there could be persons who might not be convinced or, at least, moved by the story or the idea.) After twenty years, Lou's change and achievement was considerable. What the story does not show in such great detail is the change that happened after five years or after ten years. It is certainly implausible to think that there was no change in Lou before Maytree and Deary returned. *That* would be more unrealistic than her forgiveness and her relinquishment of bitterness. We get hints of evidence of change, as when we learn that she insisted that Pete invite his father to his wedding, or when she writes to Maytree to stop the alimony and even to come home.

Conversely, Mrs. Ramsay appears to the reader as a settled character, resplendent in her years' worth of affirming loving. What the reader never sees, not even in hints as with Lou, are any of the experiences, trials, decisions, reflections and so forth that made up the fifty years of Mrs. Ramsay's life before the reader gets to meet her. The reader spends the better part of one single day with Mrs. Ramsay and so Mrs. Ramsay comes to us already formed. She is for us a stable character, and we see in her the silence that

expresses the achievement of some measure of temperance and of some balance of knowledge and respect for self with love and concern for others.

The characters of Lou Maytree and Mrs. Ramsay represent different expressions of the same silence: silence as part of the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). As I have said, silence is not itself a virtue. It does facilitate the achievement of virtue and also its expression. Moral formation is a life-long project, a continual orientation toward goodness that spurs increasing obedience to goodness as an ideal. As moral artists, we strive, like Lily Briscoe, to overcome the clumsiness of our abilities and the discouragement of our associates to render as best we can the ideal that hangs before us, just out of our reach. Unlike Lily, who could see immediately whether the purple of the clematis was just right, we paint in habits of character and may not see the effect of our work for years or decades—or ever at all, at least not in its completion. Silence helps us to produce the patterns that will repeat in our lives; it disrupts and ends patterns we must discard; and it can become, for some, a dominant theme into which other patterns weave themselves.

This has been my attempt to point out to others how silence may appear and some clues by which we can trace its effects. Where there is loss, absence, or disruption of narrative, then it is very possible that there has been some silence. In every pattern, there are rhythms that rely upon silence for their expression. And in every discursive act, every utterance, for all the things that are and have been said, it should become increasingly difficult to forget the unsayable multitude of things that have not been said or that could have been said or that have been covered over by mis-leading speech.



Felix Adler's "principal thought" regarding the moral value of silence claimed that "the highest moral value belongs to those ellipses, or intervals, during which is being revolved and matured in the mind the right utterance that is to come afterward."<sup>6</sup> I have expanded his thought a little to include not just the moment of silence before speech, but also the silence that replaces speech and the silence of reflection upon some aspect of one's moral life. I feel a bit like the child at the end of "The Emperor's New Clothes" who merely points out what is obvious but unseen to the more illustrious citizens of the town: moral philosophy must include room for and acknowledgment of these silences in order to accurately describe moral life and to prescribe moral norms. To that end, here has been a preliminary exposition of silence and a set of arguments for the moral worth of those silences.

Words, after speech, reach  
 Into the silence. Only by the form, the pattern,  
 Can words or music reach  
 The stillness

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

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6. Felix Adler, "The Moral Value of Silence," *International Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 2 (1898): 353.

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