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The Unsaid and the Unsayable:
Silence in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*

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Honors Project Advisor: Douglas Patey

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Introduction:

Whether we understand Jane Austen as the archetypal form of the social critic, “dear Aunt Jane,” or the contemporary queen of “chick lit,” the 19th-century authoress wrote works that pervade both the academic and the popular realms. Scholarly criticism and film adaptations have populated both worlds, and it seems to be a convention mostly of the former to offer a preparatory apology, or at least an explanation, for adding to its number. This thesis project began in the form of a question about subtext, and has transformed into an explication of the power of Austen’s prose to exemplify “language arts” in the most literal interpretation of the term. In their very construction, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*, demonstrate the centrality of language as an imperfect and often inaccessible bridge between self and society. In her work, Jane Austen performs the art of creating and exhibiting the absence of language through linguistic art itself in the form of the novel.

At the center of each novel lies a fundamentally linguistic gap between the outward form of common life-events—plans, accidents, courtships, and travels—and the heroine’s interiority and perceptions. This analysis posits that these novels contain two narrative threads: one social and one private. Austen’s meta-project is to use the form of the novel, particularly by means of a socially conforming narrator, to represent the operations of language in society where the entirety of real human experience, perception, and feeling can never be rendered explicit.

In all three of these works, Austen’s central character is at the heart of the narration and represents the central consciousness to which the narrative is bound. However, each heroine finds herself on the outside of her active social party looking in. In *Sense & Sensibility* Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, the poor non-inheriting descendants of landed gentry, are brought to

London—where the lion’s share of the novel’s intrigue unfolds—almost as an afterthought. They silently bear witness to the seemingly permanent destruction of their marital hopes. In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price is expected to quietly endure being taken in as the charity case of wealthy and overbearing relations, and stand by as the man she loves falls for the charms of a less deserving but more socially disposed woman of his class. Finally, in *Persuasion* Anne Elliot, the oldest heroine by several years, has a place in genteel social situations only as window dressing. She facilitates others’ social intercourse by playing the piano, or nursing a sick child when parents are otherwise engaged. Her secret history with her suitor keeps her silent as she repeatedly endures his indirect censure for ending their relationship on the advice of a friend. Each woman has her own reason for residing on the margins of society, gleaning inferences from overheard conversation, yet their marginality functions similarly in all three narratives.

The language employed by the narrator and the heroine is the obvious and influential site of both elucidation and obfuscation between the two narrative threads; between the social action and responsibilities that steer the plot; and, the private emotional life that anchors the narration. Both narrator and heroine use silences to convey meaning. The dynamics of quotation marks, direct and indirect, and allusive language create semi-articulations, but they function as silences. For the heroine, the linguistic rules of civility, decorum, and manners, eloquence, and discretion, act as cyphers that, by masking real emotional strife, enable Austen’s women to function socially. The effect of this dynamic interplay of elucidation and obfuscation, social and private language is to leave blanks where emotional life remains unarticulated and nonverbal for the characters but not the readers. If there must be a linguistic bridge between individual interior and social exterior, it follows that the two are not completely reconcilable or satisfactorily congruous, and

therefore some things will elude translation from individual to communal. We are left with linguistic “blanks” in the text. According to Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory, “blanks” are meant to force us into participation in the text as we fill them in. As Iser explains,

the text is a whole system of such processes, and so, clearly, there must be a place within this system for the person who is to perform the reconstituting. This place is marked by the gaps in the text—it consists in the blanks which the reader is to fill in. They cannot, of course, be filled in by the system itself, and so it follows that they can only filled by another system. (User 169)

This “other system” filling in the gaps left by the text is the reader. We “reconstitute” the text by reading it and gleaning meaning from the gaps we fill as we go. In Austen’s prose, these “blanks” to call attention to the incompleteness of the rhetoric of public life. Yet this is not necessarily a denunciation of the public lexicon; as I will show these heroines each prove their constancy in their silence, and the narrator will echo it approvingly in her own concluding pages.

What I explore here is the narrative residue of the private unsaid: the reticent strife, secrecy, and depth of feeling for which language is either inadequate or inappropriate. The arc of Jane Austen’s prose does not bend towards the explicitly descriptive; instead, she presents her narratives through social interactions in the lexicon of the public sphere. But this creates a problem, a linguistic dissonance in each novel between the emotional experience of the heroine and her social setting. In the narrative, her emotions are untranslatable. How can we, the reader, know these feelings exist when they remain merely implicit and unexplained? Where do we read what is left unwritten and unsaid? How do we locate these untranslatable and therefore unarticulated feelings in a novel, which is by nature a linguistic artifact?

My work begins with an examination of the language of Jane Austen, and the delicate and fraught social interactions of her heroines. Specifically, I am interested in those Austen heroines who are more linguistically disenfranchised than the Elizabeth Bennets and Emma Woodhouses of the Austen universe: Anne Eliot, Fanny Price, and Elinor Dashwood, and to a slightly lesser extent, Marianne Dashwood. Ultimately, these characters operate within a society defined by a communal and therefore public lexicon of propriety, which does not favor overly explicit or highly personal expression. From this public vantage point, “silence” in Austen represents not an absence but a presence of something substantial and interior though unexpressed. In this way, the rhetorical boundaries of civility give structure to her prose. Consequently, that which is unutterable and incommunicable within this rhetorical landscape must be the interiority of the heroine. The emotional experiences of each heroine and the lexicon with which the narrator defines her world cannot be reconciled, and that irreconcilability creates a gap between not only the heroine and her society, but between the heroine and the reader. Whatever lies within this gap is the subject of subtext, quietly alluded-to—private, unarticulated, subliminally active, but present nonetheless. The deep emotions with which all Austen heroines are brimming are appreciable *through* rather than *in* Austen’s texts.

Her narratives are relayed to us via a narrator who participates in the lexicon through which these women struggle to connect their emotional and social lives, the gaps between experience and expression are often great. The results are the precarious linguistic bridges formed by the narrator and those which the heroines build themselves as they navigate and manipulate the rules of civility and social etiquette. We may come to understand the crisis of language central to this text by examining the silences between characters; analyzing the quality

and quantity of linguistic bridges; and, considering how successfully Austen's heroine's negotiate the obstacles to their emotional fulfillment.

Austen's choice of rhetoric in her prose mirrors the real struggles of those (particularly women) who must live within the public sphere, speaking its language and attempting simultaneously to protect the private and participate in the public with dignity. As we read, we are immersed in the linguistic culture of the period, obliged to participate through the very act of reading. In this way, Austen both hides and exposes the existence of this restive silence and as a result. We may peer through Austen's lexicon of decorum and publicly appropriate prose to the unutterable strife of her central character. Though each silence springs from an emotive origin which cannot be expressed in the rhetoric of civility, and each is most acute when it separates the heroine from her potential lover, the silence that surrounds Elinor, Marianne, Fanny, and Anne differs topically and most significantly in its manifestation.

From the silence or the "blanks" around each heroine, three labels may be applied. For the sisters of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen employs a "situational silence." The events of the plot mingle with their two very different relationships with language to push them into silence and emotional repression. For Elinor, emotions are necessarily controllable forces in her life and for her sister, Marianne, they are utterly untranslatable. When each suffers from the external social alienation of their lovers, silence ensues. Alternatively, of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, Austen's narration reminds us that silence is sometimes a matter of choice like Elinor's, but more often it is a matter of social conditioning: "Few young ladies of eighteen could be less called on to speak their opinion" (MP 48). Fanny's repression of language will thus be called "learned silence." The combination of her natural shyness, her habitual exclusion from being a full-

fledged member of the family, and the constant interruptions of her Aunt Norris combine to bar her access to the social lexicon. Finally, between Anne Elliot and the people around her is a fraught “interstitial silence.” An interstice, being the empty and “small or narrow” space between adjacent objects, is defined by its vacancy. Whether between the walls of a house, the atoms in a crystal, or the gaps between posts in a picket fence, interstices are the significant negative space that characterizes two objects’ relationship to one another. In *Persuasion*, the most important interstice is the negative linguistic space between the heroine and the cast of characters that surrounds her. The pain and secrecy that shrouds her continuing love for Wentworth and their painful history creates an interstitial silence—an absence of language that creates an alienating and defining gap between them physically and emotionally.

As Stuart M. Tave writes in *Some Words by Jane Austen*, “[words are] life’s necessary fulfilling form” (Tave 21), and in the Austen universe, the rules of language and the words chosen by an individual to bridge the gap between the personal and social are most revealing. As scholars have widely noted, the quality of one’s speech in Austen’s texts is a litmus test for moral character. Her narrator, traditionally each novel’s best speaker, does not ignore the rules by which we must judge those whose stories it relays. Indeed, the narrative is composed significantly as a literature of the manners, etiquette, and thereby participates in the lexicon through which her characters must struggle to commune. “How she will communicate to her readers,” writes Tony Tanner, “is inseparable from how her characters communicate—or fail to—with each other” (Tanner 41). We must read Austen’s work, therefore as a fundamentally linguistic endeavor: not only as great literature, but also an allegorical study of language through the very medium about which it exposes so much. In other words, by writing her prose in the lexicon of

the socially appropriate and publicly proper, Austen immerses us in the waters of civility through which her characters must also wade. As a result, the narrator and reader face the same struggles of language as her heroines.

This private unsaid is specifically that of the emotional realities of the heroines, whose emotional lives are strangely elusive and allusive in the text. They are the subject of subtext because, as Tanner argues in *Jane Austen*,

Emotion is not denied but contained by her rhetoric. In general, she mutes, excludes, or eludes any kind of violence in her discourse. If she avoided over-direct expression, excessive and potentially distracting particularity, striking metaphors, too markedly arresting peculiarity and idiosyncrasy of individuation, and tends always towards the conceptual, the general, the communal, the sense and values of which would be held ‘in common,’ this is because she is constantly enacting and re-creating a requisite decorum and propriety in her language. (Tanner 37)

“Contained” is an important word in the above citation. Containment and even repression characterize the emotional lives of the three heroines of this essay, and we readers are required to find and infer the evidence of them in the narrational rhetoric that cannot express them. Inscribed in the lexicon of the publicly acceptable and accessible, these women must relate to their surroundings (and thereby be related to us by the narrator) through language that is inherently incongruous with the exquisitely complicated emotions that compound their lives. We must read them through the lines of the rhetorical form Austen uses, in which they are contained but not illuminated: displayed but never disclosed. The foundational language employed by the author

and bolstered by the prosaic society simply does not lend itself to such elucidation of emotional strife. The reader must glean from context and subtext the turmoil of Austen's heroines.

As Wayne Booth begins his explanation of "telling and showing" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, "one of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of the character's mind and heart" (Booth 3). He argues that "artifice is unmistakably present" in any narrator who tells us what no one could know. However, in terms of Austen, Booth's point here requires an addendum and perhaps even a reversal; because what lies "beneath the surface" is purposefully silenced by Austen's narrator, we must grasp at its implication rather than in omniscient elucidation. Ultimately, this is the inherently linguistic problem facing each of the heroines of this essay: the incommunicability of their emotional reactions to and observations of their surroundings within the rhetoric of the public sphere to which the narrator is so consistently faithful.

With minimal descriptive elucidation from the narrator, we are, like Anne Elliot, left wondering how her characters are to be "read" through the speech they offer. As Austen's narrator bridges the silent gap between self and society with language, we find ultimately that instead of showing or telling as Booth puts it, she shows *through* telling; she shows the blanks by narrating over and around them with her oftentimes prepositional phrases that help the reader to interpret meaning in the absence of language that punctuate the conversational flow: "after a short while," "after a moment's silence" and "after a few minutes silence on both sides," etc. As Elaine Bander puts it in "Jane Austen and the Uses of Silence,"

[Austen] dwells in detail upon misunderstandings, awkward pauses, emotionally charged silences, speeches contemplated but withheld. She is drawn not to the

éclaircissements but the confusion; not the communication but its failure. She cares as much about the rhythms of speech as she does about the language. For Austen, conversation are more than strings of sentences. They also contain silence, and she presents that silence intact to her readers. Within that silence, moreover, occur the crucial events, for the narrative surface of Austen's novels is preoccupied not with action but reaction: observation, reflection, judgement, resolution. (Bander 47)

Thus, facing Austen's readers, as well as Anne and her fellow heroines, is the challenge of reconciling the subtextual emotional world with the rhetoric and demands of civil society. Like Anne, we are thus subject to the same potential for misunderstanding, the same delicate reading through (and sometimes in spite of) speech. In each of the three examples I have chosen of this central silence, Austen uses this linguistic estrangement between emotional self and polite society in terms of the narrative "blanks" of Iser's reader-response theory, or in Wayne Booth's terms of showing and/or telling, they are, as Bander points out, the "narrative surface" on which the drama of Austen's novels takes place and the substance of her universe.

Chapter I:

Sense and Sensibility: Situational Silence

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the social circumstances of Elinor Dashwood and her sister Marianne are dictated by English property law and decorum. As their social situations and personal desires come into conflict, Austen employs two narrative threads—one internal and personal, and one external and social—to represent the struggles of these women to reconcile their lives to the rhetorical and relational demands of civil society. Both young women form unrequited and socially impossible attachments. Elinor deals with the situation by following the major rules of propriety: that is, by concealing her love and attempting to repress it. Marianne, on the other hand, tries to make her own rules.

The novel invites us to question whether anyone can find happiness within the major rules of “true propriety,” which Jane Nardin says “can only spring from some sort of sincere moral commitment to self and others in society” (Nardin 15). If, however, the moral commitment to society requires one to forsake her moral commitment to her private self, what then? Does one bow to propriety like Elinor Dashwood, abdicate the self, and give up her heart’s desire; or, does she renounce society’s claims like Marianne and pursue individual fulfillment? Either alternative carries risks to reputation and future happiness, as both heroines of this novel are well aware, and each responds to the stress with silence, withholding the language that would compromise them socially and/or personally. Yet, the reason and function of Marianne’s silence is not the same as Elinor’s, and therein lies the focus of this analysis.

In *Sense and Sensibility* language is the site of conflict for the two narrative threads. It is fair to say that to the Dashwoods, verbalization represents a potentially dangerous reification of emotion. At the heart of the emotional and linguistic conflict for both Elinor and Marianne Dashwood lies the challenge of reconciling their inner and outer worlds. For Marianne, the choice between the right words and silence is without nuance; she condemns “jargon of any kind” and declares, “sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning” (S&S 97). Though this will not always hold true as she barrels towards emotional climax in Volume II, her attitude towards language suggests the center of her character, and will greatly influence the events of her life.

For Elinor, on the other hand, surrendering her pain to the articulated—and therefore public—realm would be shattering. She prefers the guiding structure of civility in her speech. The narrator contends that “the necessity of concealing from her mother and Marianne [...] though it obliged her to unceasing exertion, was no aggravation of Elinor's distress. On the contrary it was a relief to her” (S&S 141). The fraught silences at the center of the elder Miss Dashwood's self-expression is a paradoxically comforting burden that, like her sister's contrasting attitude toward language, will come to influence her fate.

As Nardin points out, “Marianne's ideas are, of course, the result of her adherence to the cult of sensibility so important in the popular fiction of the day” (Nardin 28). They represent a departure from the traditional norms for female civility and decorum that Elinor embodies. However, the sisters should not be reduced to a simplistic comparison. It is true that Marianne relies on feeling where Elinor relies on judgment, but Marianne is not completely without

powers of observation. She is proved right, for example about Colonel Brandon's "lurid" love story (Nardin 31), and even more poignantly when she rightly accuses Elinor of a secrecy and silence that Elinor believes have been undetectable: "We have neither of us any thing to tell; you, because you do not communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing" (S&S 170).

While Marianne's approach leads her to take rash actions, Elinor's requires her to continually resist acting on her emotions. "Elinor's conduct in her unhappy love affair attests to her belief that individuals can get along more comfortably in a society if they conduct their most significant relationships according to the conventional rules, even where those rules are repugnant to their feelings. [...] Elinor is trying to live up to an ideal of a moral duty to society embodied in the minor rules of propriety, but Marianne believes that her first duty is to herself and consists of an obligation to express her feelings accordingly" (Nardin 27-28). Nevertheless, language is the means by which both women reveal their natures, and although it is tempting to contrast Marianne and Elinor as active versus passive, their differing silences bespeak their differing forms of activity. As Tony Tanner puts it, "where Marianne seeks to express herself, Elinor works to compose herself" (Tanner 86).

Ultimately, the sisters' silences stem from their circumstances and the particular men who enter and exit their lives. Silence in *Sense and Sensibility* is fundamentally situational: a function of external variables acting on the interiority of each sister, moving them to choose self-protective silence over dishonesty in the case of Marianne, and discomposure in that of Elinor. As each moves through the social landscape of the novel, their relationships with the men in their lives remain painfully unfulfilled, and their personal predispositions towards silence result in increasingly covert emotional lives. This silence leads Marianne and Elinor to a dangerous

alienation from each other, isolating each from the one person with whom the rules of propriety may be bent and even broken: her sister. As the silence surrounding both Misses Dashwood deepens, the absence of sisterly confidences creates tension for the reader. “What is concealed,” writes Iser, “spurs the reader into action, but this action is also controlled by what is revealed” (Iser 169). In other words, the active reader of *Sense and Sensibility*, while puzzling over the fact of the absence itself, must also struggle to fill in the missing content. Neither sister confides in the other, and the ensuing linguistic disenfranchisement represents a real threat and a real loss for each character, as it amounts to an abdication of self. As Tony Tanner writes,

There is a much more important kind of secrecy which Jane Austen makes us aware of: the secret of everything the heart may not enforce with the hand, display with the face, or express with the voice; that is, the secrecy of those things within which are struggling to get out and meet with different kinds of restraints and suppressions. [...] The secrets are those kept by the individual from society or those the private self must try to keep from the public self. (Tanner 80)

What Tanner defines as the central secrecy of *Sense and Sensibility* is arguably the origin of the silence that descends like a cloud over both the sisters and the narrator. While the situations spawn silences, the narrator holds forth, imposing the frame of the public lexicon around the silence that might otherwise confound or alienate a reader. By highlighting the “blanks,” the narrator makes them more visible and more comprehensible.

Like so many of Austen’s heroines, Marianne and Elinor Dashwood must rely upon only their beauty to recommend them. As the less fashionable, poor relations to their heir step-brother, and penniless cottage-dwellers, they have no agency in the business of securing their futures.

Instead they must watch as others participate in the public drama of high-stakes coupling, replete with secret engagements and wealthy matches. Significantly, these stressful circumstances in the social plot push the sisters to retreat into silence on matters of their own hearts, thus creating situational pressure on the interactions between the interior and the communal. For example, Elinor's sister-in-law and Edward's mother both seem to enjoy directly and indirectly reminding Elinor that she has no money to justify an interest in Edward Ferrars, the eldest son of the Ferrars family. The revelation of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy Steele solidifies the barrier, and the secrecy to which Lucy binds Elinor only thrusts her further into the silence of a tragic voyeur. Her only refuge, it appears, is in proper decorum, manifest chiefly in her ability to perfectly adhere to the rules of language and conduct in polite society. Elinor relies on cordiality and composure even and especially when her inner emotions threaten to boil over.

Similarly, when Marianne's poverty dampens the opportunistic Willoughby's desire to marry her and he abandons their whirlwind courtship, Marianne is left to suffer confused and alone. She, too, falls into a silence that is no less emotionally expressive than Elinor's. It is "impossible" for Marianne "to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (S&S 122). Due to her sense of loyalty to absolute emotional-linguistic coherence and authenticity, Marianne has not patience for propriety, especially when her emotions are in turmoil. Under the influence of the "cult of sensibility," she comes to believe that the only way to conquer the pain of romantic disappointment is by attrition, reducing it by destroying herself.

Elinor attempts to balance the discomposure of her interiority and the composure of her social presentation. Even in the grieving period that opens the novel, while her mother and sister

are overpowered emotionally, Elinor “could struggle, she could exert herself” in order to perform social duties in the wake of her father’s death. She balances her own “deeply afflicted” interior with her social duty, and simultaneously compensates for her less diligent family. While this is a quality that Austen seems to admire, the narrator makes it clear that it costs Elinor dearly. Her painful navigation is acute and noticeable as her situation worsens.

The most famous example of Elinor’s balancing act comes in the two-scene altercation with Lucy Steele. The conversation begins: “In a firm, though cautious tone, Elinor thus begun” (S&S 146). She girds herself before plunging into a most difficult conversation. Elinor’s progression through the discourse is a mixture of self-restraint and self-assurance. She replies to Lucy in clipped answers that the narrator qualifies or explicates. For example, Elinor “for a few moments remained silent. Her astonishment [...] was at first too great for words; but at length forcing herself to speak, and to speak cautiously” (S&S 130). She replies “with an exertion of spirits, which increased with her increase of emotion,” but when “her security sunk [...] her self-command did not sink with it” (S&S 130-131). Of this moment, Stuart Tave writes, “she is now obliged to ‘unceasing exertion’ by the necessity of concealing what she has been told. [She] makes exertion her best and only way, a strength necessary to hold herself and her world together” (Tave 107). For Elinor, this is a socio-linguistic choice, and the narrator corroborates this with the description not of its interior origins—Elinor’s love of Edward—but of its social ramifications, namely the “composure of voice under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond any thing she had ever felt before” (S&S 135). The exertion is to not express, but to hold back in silence. She obfuscates her emotional crisis by means of the passive, clipped, and

carefully investigative questions that bridge the space between her and Lucy Steele while successfully hiding the emotionally devastating ramifications of the exchange.

The social and linguistic rift between Elinor and Edward widens from the initial implication of affection when they are together at Norland to absolute incommunicability and frustrating secrecy after Lucy's revelation. We first hear of the "growing attachment" between Elinor and Edward through the controversy that surrounds it. His sister-in-law does not approve, and her—that is to say Elinor's—mother does. Though we the readers have no insight into the couple's private conversations, we hear from Elinor that nothing but careful navigations across the gap between a single man and a single woman have passed between them, and even these are not revelatory. She tells the expectant Marianne, "I am by no means assured of his regard for me" (S&S 21). "Assurance," we can assume, might have taken the form of an explicit proposal of marriage. Obviously, nothing even close to this has passed between the two. She continues,

There are moments when the extent of it seems doubtful; and till his sentiments are fully known, you cannot wonder at my wishing to avoid any encouragement of my own partiality, by believing or calling it more than it is. In my heart I feel little—scarcely any doubt of his preference. But there are other points to be considered besides his inclination. (S&S 21)

This pragmatic approach to love is offensive to Marianne, but Elinor is bound to consider her station and Edward's. Her speech sets her up for "sensiblyness," a protective mode in her emotional life. While her language exudes practicality, she does concede that her emotions are "stronger than [she has] declared" (S&S 21). This is the first significant indicator of Elinor's feelings toward language that clarifies emotional attachment, and at the same time brings her

closer to a consequential silence. She chooses to obfuscate her emotions behind a veil of pragmatism and propriety; her feelings are “no less than Marianne’s” (Tave 78), but they are couched in the emotionally evasive terms of public speech, even in the company of her sister.

Following this highly mediated moment of silenced emotions, a more explicit narrator might take the opportunity to make explicit the underlying feelings that Elinor has been so careful to avoid expressing. Austen’s narrator, however, echoes her heroine’s linguistic choice and even expands upon her anxiety over the implied and uncertain courtship and its social exposure. The narrator tells us, and perhaps Elinor believes, that she “had given her real opinion to her sister” (S&S 22). The passage continues, “she could not consider her partiality for Edward in so prosperous a state as Marianne had believed it” (S&S 22). The “truth” is that Elinor will never elaborate upon feelings too intense to publicly translate. In this passage, the narrator reinforces Elinor’s silence and highlights what is missing from the above discourse. By focusing on Elinor’s anxiety over the gossip that has made her emotional life public enough for Marianne to imagine an actual engagement, Elinor avoids discussing her true feelings for Edward. The narrator’s explanation of the anxiety itself implies the emotional commitment behind it without articulating it, thus at once creating and pushing us to fill in the first important Iserian blank around Elinor’s emotional interiority.

Painful secrecy over Edward’s engagement to Lucy Steele—his irrefutable unavailability—intensifies this habitual and pragmatic silence in Elinor, and she retreats farther into reticent strife. Likewise, the narrator steps back from her struggle as it intensifies, referring to it only as a cause of her social discomfort. Indeed the more acute Elinor’s pain, the more complementary obtuseness we see from the narrator. In the parlor scene, where Lucy, Edward, and Elinor meet in

the same room for the first time, “they were not only all three together, but were together without the relief of any other person” (S&S 241). So much is left unsaid and yet painfully obvious to the players in this scene that the narrator takes to description of social form alone. With only a nod to Elinor’s emotional turmoil and subsequent retreat into extreme decorum, the scene passes in a flurry of uncomfortable and awkward manners.

It was a very awkward moment [...] The ladies recovered themselves first. It was not Lucy’s business to put herself forward, and the appearance of secrecy must still be kept up. She could therefore only *look* her tenderness, and after slightly addressing him, said no more [...] But Elinor had more to do. [...] her manners gave some re-assurance to Edward [...] Lucy, with demure and settled air, seemed determined to make no contribution to the comfort of the others. (S&S 240-241)

Elinor characteristically attempts to compose herself in the face of this farcical secrecy. The manners of each character in this scene reveal their natures and social status. Elinor compensates, Edward missteps (to Elinor’s dismay), and Lucy is utterly unmoved by the suffering she causes to both.

Marianne’s struggles parallel Elinor’s. Her relationship with Willoughby begins with almost complete divulgence and continues to the test limits of social decorum. During their first meeting, Marianne “could not be silent [...] and she had neither shyness nor reserve in their discussion” (S&S 47). Ranging from dance to music to literature, their discussion flies by us, summarized by the narrator in a long and superlative-packed paragraph. Willoughby is ready to “acquiesce” (a suspicious word when we consider his dealings with other young women) to this

type of discourse immediately. Elinor's only censure is directed at the specific aspect of his character that attracts Marianne. She disapproves of his

propensity, in which he strongly resembled and peculiarly delighted her sister, of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances. In hastily forming and giving his opinion of other people, in sacrificing general politeness [...] and in slighting too easily the forms of world propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve, in spite of all that he and Marianne could say in its support. (S&S 48-49)

This complete and almost dangerous lack of discipline in his public presentation of himself and his ideas lulls the Dashwood women and the reader into assuming an officially articulated relationship expressed in private between Marianne and Willoughby. Linguistically, he is out of step with propriety, and Elinor has her doubts about his character as his sudden departure and avoidance of Marianne becomes increasingly suspicious. Unfortunately, the assumptions around a secret and melodramatic engagement blossom in the fertile environment of Marianne's expressive silence on the issue.

The situational pressure of Willoughby's abandonment pushes Marianne into silence. In London, Marianne alienates herself, unable to join the public and trivial discourse because she believes that her feelings exceed what commonplace rhetoric can express. Convinced that she has "nothing to tell" because she "conceal[s] nothing" (S&S 170), Marianne becomes the victim of assumption not only by members of her party but also her sister. At last, in the emotional climax in Volume II, when finally in the same room as Willoughby, Marianne gives voice to her

emotions, as the narrator explains that her feelings “were instantly expressed. Her face was crimsoned over, and she exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion. ‘Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this?’” (S&S 176)

After the dreadful encounter has ended, “Marianne continued incessantly to give way in a low voice to the misery of her feelings, by exclamations of wretchedness” (S&S 178). The narrator dampens the clamor of expressive language by slipping into paraphrase here, as if drawing a curtain over the unsavory scene. The suggestion is that while the nature of the language was emotionally true, it was nevertheless inappropriate speech. Fittingly, we never read the specific “exclamations of wretchedness” that both cannot and should not be articulated in public, but the Iserian “blank” of paraphrase pushes us to imagine. After this explosion of speech and emotion, Marianne retreats into an even more absolute silence, and her lack of dialogue until the conclusion of the novel is startling. This inability and reluctance to translate emotion into words, even words directed at Elinor or her mother, is what Tony Tanner refers to as the “muffled scream from Marianne at the heart of the novel” (Tanner 75). In its “muffling,” the narrator participates in Marianne’s problematic silence.

As they journey from London to Cleveland, Marianne is systematically represented indirectly by the narrator, silenced in a way by being “translated” into narration, and also by her own refusal to express emotions properly. At Cleveland, Marianne begins to feel the “happy privilege of country liberty, wandering from place to place in free and luxurious solitude” (S&S 303). According to the narrator, she “lounges,” “dawdles,” and “lingers” in the lead-up to her illness, and this idleness and self-indulgence, marked by the absence of conversation, is an obvious hint from Austen at the emotional source of her coming illness. The blank spots where

Marianne “should be” affect her relationships with everyone around her, and thereby influence her relationship with the reader. Her illness and near death reveal the ramifications of living so passively and allowing her emotions to diminish her life. The narration, as a consequence, becomes a source of doubt and speculation as to her condition and prospects.

Tony Tanner aptly considers Marianne to be “a person who believes in letting the emotions use the body as an expressive vehicle” (Tanner 81). Her illness appears to be the result of cultivation in her refusal of medication, until it is suddenly realistically dangerous. However the speculation around her is as inconsistent as her symptoms, and as rapidly progressing. After a “violent cold” comes of her “imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings,” Marianne is “heavy and feverish” (S&S 306). But at the start of the following chapter, she rises at her “usual time” and “to every inquiry replied that she was better.” It is only Colonel Brandon who does not trust merely to the “efficacy of sleep” (S&S 307) for her recovery. Merely “disappointed” in Marianne’s restless night that leaves her unable to sit up, Elinor is finally “very ready to adopt Mrs. Jennings’s advice, of sending for the Palmers’ apothecary” (S&S 307). Even this professional sees no danger, though the Palmer baby is removed from the house. Days pass, and Marianne is worse, better, the same, and better again, but the matter-of-fact rhetorical tone throughout the chapter does not change. The narrator lulls us into a sense of (by now) typical melodrama around Marianne, leaving us to understand her illness as the manufactured product of depression.

Suddenly, however, the text reveals that Marianne is truly ill:

Marianne, suddenly awakened by some accidental noise in the house, started hastily up, with feverish wildness, cried out—‘Is mama coming?—’ ‘Not yet,’

replied the other, concealing her terror, and assisting Marianne to lie down again
 [...] Elinor perceived with alarm that she was not quite herself. (S&S 310-311)

Marianne's delirium breaks through the narrator's misleadingly impassive tone and Elinor's own staunch composure to jolt both the reader and Elinor out of complacency. The following paragraph's opening, "It was no time for hesitation" (S&S 311), contrasts sharply with the last two pages of comparative dilly-dallying. Ultimately, the uncertainty around Marianne's illness appears to stem from the misinterpretation of the "blanks" or silences around her, and created by her. As her voice disappears from the text, she loses credibility, and her character becomes dangerously flat. Her desire for complete expression of strong and true emotions to the point of preferring silence over uttering anything less leaves the narrator high and dry. Without access to her direct thought and speech, the narrator is left with the shell of a human being that does not make sense. The effect is to bring the character into question, and sow mistrust in the narrative until such time as the tension is relieved by the return of direct discourse between Marianne and Elinor.

Once recovered and returned home, Marianne finds her voice and with it the ability to process all that has passed with Willoughby. She begins "voluntarily to speak of him again;—but that it was not without an effort, the restless, unquiet thoughtfulness in which she had been for some time previously sitting—her rising colour, as she spoke,—and her unsteady voice, plainly shewed" (S&S 349). Though, in this scene, "for some moments her voice was lost," the narrator employs a significant double entendre in informing us that she can speak again when she "recover[s] herself" (S&S 350). Similarly, Elinor finds a way through her silence in order to bend the rules of decorum and inform Marianne of Willoughby's visit during her illness. "Elinor,

who had now been for some time reflecting on the propriety or impropriety of speedily hazarding her narration, [...] managed the recital, as she hoped, with address; prepared her anxious listener with caution; related simply and honestly the chief points” (S&S 347). In revising both their preferred relationships with language, they find communion with one another.

While Marianne Dashwood’s silence originates in a mistrust of language’s narrowness of meaning, Elinor’s silence begins and ends with her mistrust of public exposure. Silence in *Sense and Sensibility* represents the tension between the private and public as well as the inadequacy of language to represent authentic emotion. Silence serves these two women in their respective and contrasting attempts to balance private expression versus public composure and for a time divides them from one another as well as their society when romantic strife enters their lives. In the process, Austen makes clear that whether, in Booth’s terms, we are “told” the meaning of Marianne’s emotional speech through paraphrase, or “shown” the physical effects of Elinor’s struggle to veil her emotions in socially awkward settings, the narrator represents the power of silence. As situational pressure envelops these women, we understand their unarticulated emotional realities in their attempts navigate through and around language. Partaking of a public lexicon that readers apparently understand and embrace, the narrator structures meaning that is “true to life.”

What Jane Austen offers in *Sense and Sensibility* is a view of two sisters, represented by their words and their silences. As in life, we can only see them imperfectly; through the narrator, at least we have to fill in the blanks that bespeak their withheld experiences and feelings. As indicated above, each sister carries with her throughout the narrative, an individual penchant for silence. Each retreats farther into it as the force of the plot strains her emotional interiority. For

the reader, the bridge between the sisters' interior and exterior worlds and all the attendant hypocrisies that flow from their emotional conflicts is the narrator. By means of the "manipulating presence" of the narrator (Booth 19), Austen suggests that Marianne's speech needs explanation because freely expressing emotional "sensibilities" falls outside the bounds of the public lexicon, or more accurately, outside "propriety." The narrator translates Marianne's climactic outbursts into a socially recognizable lexicon, and also describes Elinor's attempts at etiquette and the telling social nuances and frustrations that attend her commitment to "sense" in moments of turmoil.

Chapter II

Mansfield Park: Learned Silence

If charity can also be cruel, Fanny Price's family in *Mansfield Park* represents the phenomenon. Like several other Austen protagonists, Fanny grows into the picture of emotional containment and repression, and as a result, her inner narrative is hard to establish. The Dashwood sisters and Anne Elliot have previously known something other than "reduced" circumstances in society, but Fanny Price is born into reduced circumstances. For Fanny, silence is the consequence of learning one's place in society from a very early age.

A central concern of the novel, writes James Thompson, is "the inability to speak in the face of social and class pressures [in conjunction with] emotional and private strictures against speech" (Thompson 97). Under these combined pressures on her relationship with language, Fanny chooses to withdraw into silence. This learned silence is at once a cage, a muzzle even a refuge for Fanny Price. The novel opens with a brief explanation of her family's class that imparts the sordid personal history of the three Ward sisters. They occupy three different strata of British society, based on the social circumstances of their marriages. The youngest marries a "Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune or connections" (MP 3) and breaks with her sisters. This is the first of many disconnections in *Mansfield Park* that result in learned silences. Mrs. Price's silence is enforced by class and geography. The homes of her sisters "were so distant, and the circles in which they moved so distinct as almost to preclude the means of ever hearing of each other's existence" (MP 4). But after eleven full years, "Mrs. Price could no longer afford to cherish pride or resentment" (MP 4) and she sends her eldest, the young Fanny Price, to Mansfield Park to be raised at least in the presence of gentility.

Like the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, Fanny Price lives in the margins of *Mansfield Park*; hers is a zone that is formalized before she even enters the narrative landscape. When Sir Thomas discusses her charitable admittance into the family home, he expresses his apprehension over the possibly detrimental influence the poor cousin may have on the young Misses Bertram. He wonders, “how, without depressing her spirits too far, to make her remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*” (MP 10). Clearly, in order to maintain a distinction and thereby avoid any mixing of high and low class in the home, Sir Thomas finds that some “depression of Fanny’s spirits” would be desirable. According to him, the cousins “cannot be equals” (MP 11).

Language itself is a marker of Fanny’s oppression. The dampening effect of her family’s language on Fanny’s freedom to think and act is foreshadowed before she even arrives, and is immediately apparent upon her entrance into Mansfield Park. From the beginning at Mansfield, Fanny is educated in the social and linguistic rules that govern life in Sir Thomas Bertram’s household. Linguistically, as we experience the relationship between signifiers—the words, phrases, and gestures of the adults—and what they stand for, their denotation, we (like Fanny) infer the meaning behind the language as well as its face value. We understand that the child cannot be happy, having been torn from her home and then greeted by Sir Thomas with “untoward gravity” in attempting to give “encouragement” (MP 12). We are told that she has already endured Mrs. Norris’ constant berating chatter. The woman has harangued her “the whole way from Northampton” about “her wonderful good fortune, and the extraordinary degree of gratitude and good behavior which it ought to produce” (MP 13).

Not surprisingly, Fanny can “scarcely speak to be heard [...] without crying” at her first meeting of the family due to her conviction of “its being a wicked thing for her not to be happy” (MP 13). This is the socially hierarchical and emotionally manipulative community that Fanny must inhabit, and her natural shyness combines with her lower family position to cultivate in her a silence that insulates her interiority and governs her behavior. Ultimately, Fanny’s silent and marginal existence throughout *Mansfield Park* is a matter of class that must be maintained through strict observance by all concerned. She learns the rules and above all that her voice is best withheld. Her self-negation and inability to access the language of direct expression give rise to a silence that will permeate much of her life at Mansfield Park.

Once Fanny is established at Mansfield, the narrator describes her situation in terms of a continuum of negation. One searches in vain for something unqualifiedly positive in Fanny’s situation aside from access to food and shelter. For example, on the subject of Fanny’s happiness as well as her cousins’ cruelty, the narrator communicates as much in what is *not* said as in what is. To do this, the narrator introduces a telling double negative—a construction that engenders both an obvious and an unsaid assertion that in effect “cancel each other out” and create meaning that is understood, though not articulated.

Fanny, with all her faults of ignorance and timidity, was fixed at Mansfield Park, and learning to transfer in its favor much of her attachment to her former home, grew up there not unhappily among her cousins. There was no positive ill-nature in Maria or Julia; and though Fanny was often mortified by their treatment of her, she thought too lowly of her own claims to feel injured by it (MP 20).

Austen's double negatives may be seen as significant Iserian blanks that push the reader to fill in what Austen's careful narrator will not explicitly say in the employed lexicon. In this first depiction of Fanny's life at Mansfield, the narrator utilizes the double negative—a structure that engenders an obvious and unsaid assertion—to reflect both Fanny's silenced situation without actually articulating it. She is “*not un-happy*,” “there was *no ill-nature*.” Frequently, double negatives such as these will indicate the significant Iserian blanks that push us to fill in what Austen's careful narrator will not explicitly articulate in *Mansfield Park*. She is not unhappy, therefore she is also not *happy*; there is no *ill-nature* in Maria or Julia but there is also no *good* nature in them.

The narrator does not openly critique these upper-class young ladies, but she can carefully use silent blanks to point us to the absence of their positive characteristics and the ramifications upon Fanny. By using double negatives, the narrator informs the reader of Fanny's passive dispossession of speech and agency. Additionally, through double negatives, the narrator models a form of Fanny's passive dispossession of speech and agency, observing dispassionately that Fanny, though often humiliated by her cousins, thinks, “too lowly of her own claims to feel injured.” Austen is confident that the reader will understand that the “silence” between the lines contains the true picture of Fanny's limited existence among relatives whose charity is superficial and devoid of love for a vulnerable child.

The narrator suggests Fanny's growing reticence but does not provide details of the words or actions that cause it. The reader must infer the facts leading up to the narrator's conclusions about Fanny's emotional life via summaries and paraphrase. James Thompson addresses these narrational allusions to emotion in terms of the “limits of language.” He notes

that “the narrator is quite explicit that particular emotions lie outside the possibility of speech” (Thompson 93) and cannot be, as *Mansfield Park*’s narrator puts it, “clothed in words” (MP 370). For example, when Edmund facilitates Fanny’s correspondence with her family, “Fanny’s feelings on the occasion were such as she believed herself incapable of expressing” (MP 16). All we are given here are the facts of feeling emotions, and not the details of what they are. Austen knows that a sensitive reader will need nothing more explicit in order to empathize with Fanny’s “acute” feelings and to imagine the banal cruelty of cold relations.

Her path to any kind of verbal expression begins with Edmund. His stewardship of Fanny’s education and communication will make him better loved by her than any body except her brother William (MP 22), and his role as interpreter blossoms from these early days of overseeing her education and literary training. Over time she comes to rely on Edmund, the one kindred spirit in the house, to translate for her. We know she has strong feelings for him because the narrator has told us that “without any display of doing more than the rest, or any fear of doing too much, he was always true to her interests, and considerate of her feelings, trying to make her good qualities understood, and to conquer the diffidence which prevented their being more apparent” (MP 21-22).

The introduction of the Crawfords—and with them the real beginning of the social plot—serves to call attention to Fanny’s customary position of quiet alienation from events the of the novel. The two narrative threads gain definition and clarity in context of the Crawfords, and likewise, Fanny’s unobtrusive existence within a party of social, vibrant, and often linguistically careless characters becomes more noticeable once the family has something new to talk of. Indeed, Fanny’s silence moves the narrator to explicate: “And Fanny, what was *she* doing and

thinking all this while? and what was *her* opinion of the new-comers? Few young ladies of eighteen could be less called on to speak their opinion than Fanny” (MP 48). Here, Austen parodies the purposeful/cultivated disparity between the speakers and the non-speakers at Mansfield Park, giving us to understand that it is both humorous and sad that Fanny is silent because no one has *asked* her to speak. When she does speak, she adheres to the convention of offering her voice only in moderation. The narrator says that she “paid her tribute of admiration to Miss Crawford’s beauty” only “in a quiet way, very little attended to” (MP 48). Being habitually “little attended to” has cultivated Fanny’s consistent silence as well as her habitually conservative speech, which is in itself a form of silence.

While Fanny demonstrates qualities of reserve almost to the point of masochism, the loquacious Mary Crawford reveals her low character by both talking too much and in language that is self-avowedly inexact (MP 92). Edmund begins to attribute moral qualities to Miss Crawford’s speech that simply are not there. Mary Crawford’s indiscretion has been obvious to Fanny from her first appearance. In introducing Mary, the narrator provides almost a catalogue of moral corruption. She remarks on the Bertram family’s “consequence,” she expresses the desire to marry, “provided she could marry well,” she disregards Tom Bertram’s faults in the context of his wealth; she treats such matters as important as marriage “as a joke” and admonishes everyone else for “think[ing] of it seriously” (MP 42). In her earliest introduction to the text, Mary has been revealed by the narrator as a living model of moral dubiousness with which we are not meant to be impressed. Even so, on the topic of Mary Crawford, the narrator declares, “Fanny could have said a great deal, but it was safer to say nothing, and leave untouched all Miss Crawford’s resources, her accomplishments, her spirits, her importance” (MP 199).

Silence becomes a refuge for Fanny in the midst of social pressures, but as Mary Crawford's rhetoric begins influence Edmund, Fanny finds herself bereft of her confidante and translator. After the return of Sir Thomas and the subsequent break-up of the home-theatre production *Lovers' Vows*, Fanny finds herself listening to Edmund speak in "language [that] was so new to Fanny that it quite embarrassed her" (MP 197). Suddenly, she must check her honesty and candor in Edmund's company, as he responds to her not with genuine understanding but with "smiling" sarcasm. When she says that she feels "unlike other people" in her social pleasures, preferring to listen rather than to speak, he scoffs,

"Why should you dare say *that*? [...] Do you want to be told that you are only unlike other people in being more wise and discreet? But when did you or any body ever get a compliment from me, Fanny? Go to my father if you want to be complimented. He will satisfy you." (MP 197)

He calls her "pretty" and adds, "you must begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at." Fanny emphatically begs for more reserve, "'Oh! don't talk so, don't talk so,' cried Fanny, distressed by more feelings than he was aware of" (MP 198). This is an important blank in the narration, as usual concerning emotion. Here, Fanny's feelings are unarticulated, but not un-communicated. Austen's narrator has alluded so clearly to the emotions that Fanny cannot expose to the public sphere via language, and especially not to Edmund, that no reader could misunderstand their nature or orientation.

Fanny bears witness to the catalogue of misjudgments that make up the social plot of *Mansfield Park*, finally exemplifying moral strength in her measured silence. Elaine Bander suggests that Fanny, "isolated, passive, silent, has ample opportunity to observe and reflect and

to ponder those observations and reflections in her heart” (Bander 50). The narrator, unlike that of *Sense and Sensibility*, who negotiates and undermines the language employed by the heroines, works to bolster and translate as best she can these musings. Though neither narrator explicitly passes judgment, the reader is guided to the truth by way of the Iserian blanks, the allusion through irony, and through reimagining what Wayne Booth calls in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, showing and telling as showing *through* telling.

Consequently, one need only look at which characters merit quotation marks in *Mansfield Park* in order to discern their social status and their consequential relationship and access to language. Frequently, Fanny’s words are embedded in the narration or paraphrased, as when the narrator reports, “Fanny said that she was rested” (MP 96), and “Fanny’s answer was extremely civil” (MP 68). Her second-class citizenship is solidified by the time she arrives on the Bertram doorstep. She is already “stifled” and can only grow in alienation from her own feelings and desires in that environment. The narrator, making prolific use of paraphrase, provides the overwhelming majority of Fanny’s thoughts and feelings. As Thompson notes, in *Mansfield Park* “the presence of emotion is announced, but because it is not described or enacted in any way, we cannot see it—we are told but not shown” (Thompson 96). The narrator suggests that the power of Fanny’s emotions often require a “mediated” presentation: the narrator explains that Fanny’s “feelings were very acute, and too little understood to be properly attended to. Nobody meant to be unkind, but nobody put themselves out of their way to secure her comfort” (MP 14), and her “feelings created, made it easier to swallow than to speak” (MP 74). Often when Fanny’s voice is directly heard, she is in private conversation with Edmund, and just as he is the best conversation

partner for her, he is also the best listener. It is no wonder, then, that as Mary Crawford grows in his affections, Fanny's voice dwindles into an even more guarded silence.

As a problematical heroine, Fanny Price may frustrate, but she is never unsympathetic. The learned silence that characterizes her life—though it weighs heavily on her as she watches Edmund court another woman for whom language comes easily and is seemingly unlimited, and whose witty speech is always enticingly inexact—also bolsters her sense of moral propriety. Silence weighs increasingly on her life as the novel progresses. Fanny likewise cannot defend herself when her refusal of Henry Crawford, the “most important single act” (Tave 158) in the novel, comes under question. As Thompson has noted, the pressures of society and class combined with emotional and private needs tend to leave Fanny speechless. She develops and emerges slowly from within the confines of learned silence, having had little opportunity to cultivate social delicacy. Jenny Davidson explores Fanny's social development by focusing on hypocrisy and politeness in *Mansfield Park*. “Because Fanny is in a position of dependence,” Davidson argues, “she cannot safely practice the art of pleasing. Civility can be the custom only of those whose social status is high enough to preclude their seeming to become parasites upon the wealthy” (Davidson 252). In the Bertram household, Fanny is never allowed to forget that she is open to being seen as a “parasite.” Not quite a family member, not quite a servant of the family, and neither sister nor potential wife for Edmund, Fanny needs no one to tell her that she has no right to speak. When she does so the sound of her own voice leaves her “shocked to find herself [...] the only speaker in the room” (MP 145-146).

“Of all Austen's characters,” argues Thompson, “Fanny Price suffers the greatest impediments to speech” (Thompson 93), but the learned silence that has become her refuge will

soon collapse under the mounting pressure to marry Mr. Crawford, a man whom both the reader and Fanny have witnessed to be amoral and untrustworthy. Henry Crawford's proposal thus sparks a complex episode in Fanny's life, made all the more intricate by her fraught relationship with language. The proposal scene brings Fanny out of silence only to explicitly beg Mr. Crawford to stop talking.

After having twice drawn back her hand, and twice attempted in vain to turn away from him, she got up and said only, with much agitation, 'Don't, Mr. Crawford, pray don't. I beg you would not. This is a sort of talking which is most unpleasant to me. I must go away. I cannot bear it.' (MP 301)

But he talks on, overflowing with words of affection and offering himself and all his fortune. The narrator says that her astonishment and confusion only increases as he presses for an answer. Again, she speaks directly. "No, no, no,," she cried, hiding her face. 'This is all nonsense. Do not distress me. I can hear no more of this.'" (MP 301-302)

By paraphrasing Crawford's proposal, and quoting Fanny's speech, Austen has given a strong signal that Fanny and her world are undergoing radical transition into direct speech. In these circumstances, facing attention and pressures never even imagined, Fanny tries to sink back into her position as wallflower. With the proposal hanging over her, however, and the continued presence of Mr. Crawford, Fanny's silence is increasingly under assault. He attempts to force her or trick her into speaking by asking suddenly and aggressively, "Did you speak?" stepping eagerly to Fanny and addressing her in a softened voice; upon her saying 'No,' he added, 'Are you sure you did not speak? I saw your lips move'" (MP 340). In response, Fanny "could not be prevailed on to add another word, not by dint of several minutes of supplication

and waiting” (MP 341). When she is “wearied at last into speaking” (MP 343), she is interrupted, or has “little voluntarily to say” (MP 366)

Following this traumatic compulsion to speak, Fanny seeks refuge in a silence she suddenly finds difficult to sustain. Until now, it has been necessary to speak “only when she could not help it” (MP 305). Occupying the role of *ingenue* in a wealthy household is new to her, and comes with a burden of responsibility to actively employ language. Sir Thomas’ visit to her chambers at the opening of Volume III continues the changes that Austen signaled in the proposal scene. With Sir Thomas, “Fanny would rather have been silent, but being obliged to speak, she could not forbear” (MP 312). She doesn’t “dare” to “interrupt him” but ultimately, she is “forced by the anxiety of the moment” to tell her uncle of her refusal of Mr. Crawford. To him, she literally speaks in silence: “he saw her lips form into a *no*, though the sound was inarticulate, but her face was like scarlet” (MP 316). He has no idea that Fanny has moral objections based on covert knowledge of Henry Crawford’s flirtation with Maria Bertram in Volume I. Her judgment of Mr. Crawford is based on an accurate first impression that has only been bolstered by his actions later in their acquaintance.

Unfortunately, she can never say so. She has lived within the bounds of learned silence. To decry this suitor would be to tarnish the reputations of her social superiors (including her cousins), and to break with the lexicon of public propriety by divulgence of the vulgar truth. Characteristically, Fanny “sunk under the appalling prospect of discussion, explanation and probably non-conviction” (MP 317). “Modesty, then, dispossesses Fanny of her meaning by reversing her own assertions” (Johnson 106). Social and familial loyalty stand between Fanny and a reasonable rejection of what appears to be an “honorable” and “advantageous” proposal of

marriage; nevertheless, speaking more boldly than ever before, Fanny asserts, that “I am so perfectly convinced that I could never make him happy, and that I should be miserable myself,” and this language, specifically, the “great black word *miserable*” introduces a “burst of tears” (MP 320). This is not merely the timidity of learned silence, but the silence of moral conviction.

When Edmund gets involved, his rationale for broaching the subject of Mr. Crawford’s proposal is significantly language-focused (MP 345). The “comfort of communication” has been lacking from Fanny’s life for a long time, and most especially since Edmund’s attention has been so focused on Mary Crawford. Edmund too has fallen into the conviction that Fanny’s denial of Crawford is coy rather than sincere. He urges her to “let him succeed at last” (MP 347) and this is all too much for Fanny. The advice from the man she loves to marry another pushes Fanny into emphatic speech, and it is greeted by Edmund’s tempering reason, and reminder of the rules of the social lexicon of composure:

"Oh! never, never, never! he never will succeed with me." And she spoke with a warmth which quite astonished Edmund, and which she blushed at the recollection of herself, when she saw his look, and heard him reply, "Never! Fanny!—so very determined and positive! This is not like yourself, your rational self."

"I mean," she cried, sorrowfully correcting herself, "that I *think* I never shall, as far as the future can be answered for; I think I never shall return his regard." (MP 347)

When neither silence nor direct speech will serve, Fanny takes refuge in the ultimate silence: absence. By returning to her mother's home, Fanny removes the moral center from Mansfield, and her complete silence will ultimately both bespeak her virtue to the Bertram family, and teach her the value of Mansfield as her home and place of belonging. Through silence, she will triumph over the Crawfords, whose over-speaking and over-acting expose their moral vacuity.

For some readers, Fanny Price is a hard sell as a protagonist because we have so little explication of her speech and emotion. Fanny walks through a socially decorous but often morally vacuous world and “does not put a foot wrong. Indeed, she hardly risks any steps at all: [...] there is an intimate and significant connection between her virtue and her immobility” (Tanner 143). While this has proven problematic for some readers, making her seem prudish and unlikeable, there is something fundamentally intriguing and almost pedagogical about such a motionless character. In *Mansfield Park* especially, “Jane Austen maintains her view that propriety is true propriety only if it is backed up by solid moral considerations” (Nardin 15), and Fanny is in many ways Austen's poster child for true propriety. As a result, Fanny becomes the “quiet auditor” of the world of Mansfield—recording, judging, and protecting its occupants with her silence. As Stuart Tave writes, “it is always Fanny who sees the entire process, who sees what others are doing when they themselves do not understand their own actions, sees the whole drama of their interaction” (Tave 194). The “entire process” is the social narrative thread to which Fanny's consciousness and thereby the narrative is bound. This view of Fanny places her in the strangely alienated center, looking out at other, more active members of the cast but always acting as the anchor of the narration and the sign post for the moral right.

Chapter III

Persuasion: Interstitial Silence

Considering the two narrative threads in *Persuasion*—one social, one private—it is possible to sense more clearly than in other Austen novels the gap between the two, where the heroine’s experience resides in all its complexity. The silence in *Persuasion* represents the most literal Iserian blank in Austen’s work; it is a definitive silence engendered by an inescapable marginality. Age and a past engagement that has turned into an eight-year estrangement place Anne Elliot on the outside looking in at both the social party and a man with whom her communion has gained and then lost, something unique to her among Austen’s heroines.

We first meet Anne Elliot by way of a peripheral introduction. Her father, narcissistic and preoccupied with the family’s rank and reputation, takes up the opening of the novel. Anne is introduced through his family history. Her introduction is overshadowed by the preferential treatment of the estate and its history in which Sir Walter takes solace in times of “unwelcome sensations arising from domestic affairs” (P 3). Family reality is much less important than the elevation of public position, and Anne is almost worth more listed as his “issue” on the pages of his *Baronetage of England* than as his living breathing daughter, “born August 9, 1787” (P 3). In her corporeal and social form, she is “only Anne” (P 5). Such indirect characterization echoes the social position she has occupied since her mother’s death: off-to-the-side and out-of-focus.

Tony Tanner calls Anne “the loneliest of Jane Austen’s characters” (Tanner 208). It is through her narcissistic family members that Anne finds her way onto the pages of the novel. She is likewise the vehicle for Austen’s critique of Sir Walter. Anne is the daughter whose “elegance of mind and sweetness of character [...] must have placed her high with any people of real

understanding, [but she] was nobody with either her father or her sister” (P 5). Their faults are thus, in Booth’s terms, shown through the telling of Anne’s best qualities (Booth 10). Ultimately, most of the novel will be told this way, made legible by dint of Anne’s mere contextualizing presence.

Like Fanny Price, Anne is at once the narrational center, and a narrative bystander. Although she provides the focus of the narration, others move the plot by making decisions, taking action, and speaking up. Essentially, the plot is refracted through Anne’s consciousness. In his analysis of the narrative voice of *Persuasion*, Thomas Wolfe argues that, as a novel, “the distinctiveness of *Persuasion* lies in Jane Austen’s mode of dramatizing the consciousness of the heroine, Anne Elliot. Technically, this involves a close identification of the narrative point of view and tone of voice with Anne, so that much of the action of the novel is mediated through Anne’s consciousness” (Wolfe 687). Anne resides almost entirely on the margins while the action of the novel takes place at a distance. In terms of the social drama of the novel, “talking” as Wolfe continues, “exists for the sake of supplying Anne with material for feeling” (Wolfe 691). The nature of her relationships with her family and their overwhelming talkativeness makes it impossible and unimaginable to speak honestly or clearly about her own experience. Not only are her feelings unutterable to Wentworth; they are unutterable to everyone.

Social niceties are the only avenue of conversation available to Anne and Wentworth upon his return. Because they no longer know how to speak to each other, because they have so much unspoken emotion between them, and because they are still in love but cannot know whether the feeling is mutual after so much time, they barely make eye contact. Like two magnets pressed together south pole to south pole, Wentworth and Anne are frustratingly

repellent though—depending on their orientation—naturally attractive. As Anne realizes, “Now they were as strangers; nay, worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement” (P 64). As he moves increasingly towards the center of the social party, she will move accordingly to the margins, and go unnoticed in doing so.

Whenever Anne is overwhelmed by the emotional repercussions of overheard speech, the implications of body language and the anxiety of living so utterly silently, the narrator takes over to describe, not just the emotions themselves, but also the interpretive fog they produce around the pregnant stiffness that characterizes Anne and Wentworth’s carefully proper interactions. For example, in describing their first meeting after eight years, the narrator communicates Anne’s disordered emotions in fragments. Their physical interactions are indirect, mediated by social decorum. Their first meeting rushes by us as it does Anne, a wordless blur of civility and indirect contact that is only comprehensible thanks to the map that etiquette provides: “Her eye half met Captain Wentworth’s; a bow, a curtsy passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing” (P 59).

She hears not his words, but rather the sound of his voice; she sees not his body but rather his polite bow and her own corresponding curtsy; she knows not what he says, but only that it enough to ensure the “footing” for the polite steps forward into the social gathering as well as the steps that will keep him at a distance from direct communication with her. A telling silence surrounds the meaningless formalities, obfuscating true emotions. The scene is a wordless blur of civility and indirect contact. For Austen and her reader, the absence of Anne’s feelings in this

moment is more expressive than any maudlin characterization of emotional suppression, which would constitute a break with the narrative's social lexicon.

With such a gap between them, Anne wonders, "how were his sentiments to be read?" (P 60). He is, like language itself, and like the novel itself, a text to be "read," interpreted and comprehended through a maze of the unarticulated language. This constant reading of Wentworth engulfs Anne. Although she quickly "heard the same voice, and discerned the same mind" (P 64) in Frederick Wentworth, it is only peripherally that she can do so. It is through the words that he voices within her hearing that she can "discern" Fredrick Wentworth to be the same man eight years later. On the other hand, in comparing their new relationship to that of the past, it is the absence of speech that marks the painful transformation. Between them, "they had no conversation together, no intercourse but that the commonest civility required" (P 63). Despite the fact that it was once "most difficult to cease to speak to one another" and that there could have been "no two hearts so open" (P 63-64), no parley now bridges their two minds. Thus their alienation is a linguistic one. The transition from open dialogue to silence restricts and characterizes them now. And for Anne, the silence is total. No longer an ingenue yet not a wife, she is in limbo, removed the margins and keeper of a burdensome secret. Just as the reader must interpret the blanks in Austen's text, Anne must read through the blanks in his language to overhear language that expresses the mind she still loves (P 64). As the novel progresses, Anne's ear is tuned the Fredrick Wentworth's voice, and her self-perception and self-image become increasingly entangled in his words that are oriented—but not directed—towards her.

After "the worst is over," and their first of many indirect meetings has come and gone in a whirl of silent and unnoticed drama, Mary relieves any "suspense" that might have come

around the question of Wentworth's opinion by ever-so-tactfully pointing out "Captain Wentworth was not very gallant by you Anne, [...] he said 'You were so altered he should not have known you again'" (P 60). This bit of gossip comes via Henrietta, and triggers Anne's utter distraction from the events of the novel until his voice becomes discernible again in a linked, and unspecified scene. What follow are dislocated musings on the past and on Wentworth's utterings in the present. His words "could not but dwell with her" (P 61). Overwhelmed, she mentally wanders in through a mixture of her own memory and the projections of her imagination specifically onto his language. Once, "he had been most warmly attached to her, [...] but except from some natural sensation of curiosity, he had no desire of meeting her again" (P 61). When and where she hears him describe his hypothetical bride as a woman with "a strong mind, with sweetness of manner" (P 62) we do not know. However, despite his quoted claim that "any body between fifteen and thirty may have [him] for the asking," we learn that Anne knows/believes herself to be his "only secret exception" (P 61). She loses herself in an interpretive fog, concluding that all his remarks translate into one simple fact: "He had not forgiven Anne Elliot" (P 61).

An Iserian blank shrouds Anne's specific feelings for Wentworth. Their physical interactions reflect their fraught evasion and their attraction can only be mediated by social decorum. Anne feels the stifling consequences of social etiquette acutely. As James Thompson argues, "Austen's particular focus is on the individual or personal relations and the bars between them. Most often she stresses social impediments to speech, but these impediments are seen within a larger frame of the limits to language itself" (Thompson 100). With no recourse to real communication, the narrator's description of the action of bodies becomes a cypher for the

reader's interpretation of speech. When he takes a seat at the piano and Anne "unintentionally [...] return[s] to that part of the room," he says with "studied politeness, 'I beg your pardon, madam, this is your seat'" (P 72). This "cold politeness" and "ceremonious grace, were worse than any thing" (P 72) for Anne. As she plays the piano, "her fingers were mechanically at work [...], without error, and without consciousness" (P 72). This automatic physical movement as described by the narrator parallels the stiff mechanical etiquette that characterizes her interactions with Wentworth.

It is here in this void of superficial action that Austen's real story takes place; here, the narrator exhibits Anne's struggle to comprehend Wentworth across the seemingly meaningless and socially decorous wasteland. Tanner argues that "Anne often has to 'smother' her own feelings and preoccupation realizing that they are of little or no interest to her interlocutors. She knows what it is to 'converse' without 'communicating.' She also knows what it is like to talk without being heard" (Tanner 236). However, certain small breaks in this veneer of propriety may speak volumes: when Wentworth uses her first name instead of addressing her as "Miss Elliot" in a moment of crisis (P 114); when he asks haltingly about her refusal of Charles Musgrove's proposal (P 89); when he honors Louisa's "firmness of character" (P 88); and, when leaves the concert in Bath because there is "nothing worth [his] staying for" (P 190), their history is invoked. Both the reader and Anne hear the influence of the unspoken emotional past on the language of the present.

When Louisa speaks to Wentworth of Anne's refusal of Charles Musgrove's proposal, we witness the scene from Anne's covert perspective. She overhears as Captain Wentworth asks for

the details, “after a short pause” (P 89). His hesitation—which suggests his own emotional reaction—combined with the subject matter of the conversation, cause Anne great distress.

The sounds were retreating, and Anne distinguished no more. Her own emotions still kept her fixed. She had much to recover from, before she could move. The listener's proverbial fate was not absolutely hers; she had heard no evil of herself, but she had heard a great deal of very painful import. She saw how her own character was considered by Captain Wentworth, and there had been just that degree of feeling and curiosity about her in his manner which must give her extreme agitation. (P 89)

The narrator does not elucidate the reason for Anne’s “extreme agitation,” but merely alludes to the “painful import” of this conversation. Wentworth’s emotional investment, bespoken by his silent hesitation and his probing for information, has been enough to overwhelm Anne emotionally. She has listened to and interpreted his silences just as we must read and interpret hers through the rhetoric of the narrator.

After the trip to Lyme has come to a crashing halt, and the party must break up in order to convey both Henrietta and the news of Louisa’s fall to the Musgrove family, Wentworth significantly interjects “but, if Anne will stay, no one is so proper, so capable as Anne!” (P 114). Suddenly, Anne’s appearance prompts him to finally directly communicate to her. “You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her,” he cries. The narrator highlights the significance of this moment by adding that he turned to her, speaking “with a glow and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past” (P 114). While Wentworth’s extreme agitation may emanate from his attachment to Louisa, the warm and respectful manner in which he speaks about and to

Anne mark this moment as a bridge over the chasm of silence between them. Contextually, in terms of the plot, Wentworth's words do not contradict expectations. Linguistically, however, Anne has received them as a welcome return of his past regard. Specifically, he has used her first name and praised her as being both proper and capable; and, he has addressed her in an almost affectionate tone.

As usual, when Anne is overwhelmed, the narrator paraphrases her words in a decorous, if minimal, way: "She expressed herself most willing, ready, happy to remain. 'It was what she had been thinking of, and wishing to be allowed to do'" (P 114). These indirect quotations contrast significantly with Wentworth's direct ones and create dramatic tension. Wentworth looks directly and imploringly at Anne, his eyes piercingly directed to hers for the first time in eight years; and, Anne responds obliquely, strangely not looking into the face of the man on whom she has been so focused for almost a hundred pages. For the first time, Wentworth is making a gesture toward Anne, although it comes through highly *mediated* language. And although Anne is moved by his intensity, she cannot respond in kind. The magnets are still unable to connect. With Wentworth's emotion-laden words represented directly and Anne's heavy emotions subsumed in the narrator's somewhat cool representation, Austen has created a linguistic structure in this scene that conveys vividly the fact that these passionate characters are still not quite in the same place at the same time, emotionally.

After Lyme, however, language is no longer functions as the guardian of strict and empty formality. Gradually at first, and then with growing momentum, it begins to admit nuances and whispers, possibilities and hope. Suddenly it is she who is most significantly overheard, she who receives his hopeful attention from across the room, and she who communicates across

interstices by speaking around him, near him, but never directly *to* him. Just as Anne overhears the unsaid emotions behind Wentworth's speech in the first half of the novel, it is he who overhears hers in Bath. As Stuart Tave elegantly puts it, “One way of describing the action of *Persuasion* is to say that it begins when Anne's word has no weight and ends when her word pierces a man's soul” (Tave 256).

In Bath Anne, who knows the communicative power of silence and subtext, begins not only to read Wentworth's silenced emotional interior but also to attempt “to transmit a second meta-message by emphasizing that ‘I am not yet so much changed,’ hoping that the generalizing response will not be lost on Wentworth—though she still fears ‘she hardly knew not what misconstructions’” (Tanner 238). Once they begin to speak a little in Bath, Tanner continues, “her words have a double target and a dual purpose, as she hopes that the nearby Wentworth, seated and writing, will hear them and detect the personal message contained in the general statements” (Tanner 241). When, in the single most important conversation in the novel, Anne famously defends women's constancy in love and critiques male writers who trivialize and stereotype female lovers, she listens for evidence of Wentworth's overhearing. She senses that he is “striving to catch sounds, which yet she did not think he could have caught” (P 233-234). At last, he speaks to her “with eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her for a moment” (P 236). In this scene, both have been communicating purposefully indirectly. She has been talking to him through her discussion with Captain Harville, and he, while supposedly writing to Captain Benwick, “had been also addressing her!” (P 237).

“Conventional silence forces unconventional communication” (Bander 56) between hero and heroine in *Persuasion*. As Bander argues, “their courtship and mutual understanding proceed

without direct speech; he proposes in a letter and she accepts with a look. Only then do they enjoy the power of conversation” (Bander 53). Wentworth’s proposal letter makes explicit the perception of all the indirect communications that have filled the silence between the lovers all along. The letter provides the climactic break in the silence with specific references to that silence. It is possibly the most concrete linguistic bridge between two “selves” in all of Austen’s novels. At the very beginning of his letter, Wentworth addresses the silence that has divided them, and the social rules that have prevented their reconciliation. He speaks to her, literally, “by such means as are within [his] reach,” pen and paper.

“I can listen no longer in silence [...] You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own than when you almost broke it, eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, weak and resentful I have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone, I think and plan. Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes? I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice when they would be lost on others. Too good, too excellent creature! You do us justice, indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating, in

F. W.

I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look, will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house this evening or never. (P 237-238)

Still confined by the structures of propriety, this covert piece of writing is the only medium by which the emotions between them can reach fruition at this point. By wondering, “For you alone, I think and plan. Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes?”

Wentworth acknowledges the silent communication that has passed between them, referencing the “reading” and “penetrating” of interior realities despite linguistic and social barriers in which Anne (and the reader) have been engaged throughout the novel.

The silent distance between Anne and the more direct participants in the events of the plot contains a mixture of her own and the narrator’s interpretations. In an analysis of silence in *Persuasion*, Elinor Fiedler suggests, “Both Anne and the narrator use reticence paradoxically to communicate more to an audience than is possible or appropriate in speech, and to compel the creation and development of intimacy with an audience” (Fiedler 159-160). Similarly, in her exploration of the “Janeite” phenomenon, Laura Fairchild Brodie points out the significant intimacy that Austen’s special brand of irony creates between reader and author (or at least reader and narrator). Brodie, too, invokes Iser in her argument and writes, “In the act of reading ‘between the lines,’ [...] Austenites fill the gaps in Austen's text, playing the role of what Wolfgang Iser would call Austen's ‘implied reader’ (Brodie 55). As the reader is pushed to activity in *Persuasion*, Anne herself and her narrator are similarly pushed to interpretive action alongside the reader by the silent interstices that compound the novel and its heroine.

In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot differs as a protagonist from the Dashwood sisters and Fanny Price in that she is not alone in her silence; she shares it with Captain Wentworth. Like the other silences we have addressed, theirs is a chasm between words and actions, but across that interstitial space their hearts remain connected, and the plot's central purpose is to dispel all barriers social and emotional to their realization of that fact. Between Anne Elliot and the people around her is a fraught interstitial silence. Her deepest thoughts and feelings have long been relegated to an interstitial space, narrowly confined and hidden from everyone. "What is not" is all she has of "what was hoped for" with Captain Wentworth.

With her family, Anne's word "had no weight" (P 5) and this is a central problem for Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*. Like Fanny Price and Elinor Dashwood, Anne is left to watch and listen as gossip flurries around the coupling of Louisa Musgrove and Captain Wentworth, with no influence on the events as they unfold. As the new ingenues, the Musgrove sisters explore flirtation, courtship, and travel. Meanwhile, as Stuart Tave puts it, "it is Anne who hears, it is Anne who is unheard" (Tave 264). Ultimately, she operates parallel to the main action—intrinsically bound to it and yet painfully estranged. Rather than communicating with it, she merely watches from across the layered interstices that separate her from the others, she literally follows along, and occasionally provides filler as a nurse or confidante to help it progress. Yet paradoxically, this peripheral and almost marginal character who provides a soundtrack for the other more active and more loquacious members of the cast is our heroine and narrative focus—molding our understanding of the plot while rarely touching it. This alienation between plot and heroine, and heroine and hero is where the work of the novel occurs. In the silent interstices that surround Anne, Austen's novel gains life and meaning.

Conclusion:

For some readers, these three novels conclude too abruptly. We have seen how the plots have been energized by the tensions of private versus public, personal versus social interests and obligations; the linguistic aspects of the conflicts have been explored not only in words spoken, but also by those withheld; and, the ensuing “silences” have created a blank space in which multiple layers of meaning reside between the words spoken. At the moment when the most private feelings finally breach the private interior to find expression in the public realm, however, the romantic climax is turned over to the narrator, who is unequivocally loyal to the social lexicon and almost curtly inexplicit. Austen’s narrator leaves a purposeful and obvious Iserian blank at the moment of romantic exposure.

It should be conceded that all of Austen’s novels come to similarly happy yet paraphrased ends. However, while the narrators of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Emma* explicate their lack of divulgence at the close of each novel, they do not do so in reference to a chronicle of silences. In *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, or *Persuasion*, the obscurity of the final resolutions relies specifically upon the reader’s understanding of the silence that has pervaded the previous pages.

For example, in *Sense and Sensibility*, after the explanation of Lucy’s betrayal of Edward for Robert, Elinor’s emotions finally boil over and she leaves the room to avoid a public display of inappropriate but overwhelming feeling. “Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease” (S&S 360). Their reunion and the subsequent negotiations for marriage that

follow this explosive moment is left to the careful propriety and paraphrase of the narrator's voice:

This only need be said;—that when they all sat down to table at four o'clock, about three hours after his arrival, he had secured his lady, engaged her mother's consent, and was not only in the rapturous profession of the lover, but, in the reality of reason and truth, one of the happiest of men [...] His heart was now open to Elinor, all its weaknesses, all its errors confessed (S&S 361).

“This only need be said” is a phrase that employs Iser's blank to explicitly engage the implied reader's interpretive and imaginative activity. This moment in the narration hinges on the assumption of our foreknowledge of all the language and emotions that have inhabited the silent gap between Elinor and Edward, Elinor and society, and Elinor and the reader. In her resolution, Austen invokes all that was implicit in Elinor's silence, finally calling upon our accumulated interpretations to fill in the language and actions that match the romantic conclusion. Thus, the narrator can maintain her commitment to the rhetoric of public decorum and still relay the intense emotions with which the heroines are now brimming.

Marianne, on the other hand, relinquishes her principled silence, which had been based on the cult of sensibility, when she finally makes an intimate connection with Colonel Brandon, accepting her social position as a wife, and falling easily adopting the speech and customs of propriety. As the narrator tells us, “Marianne was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions” (S&S 378). She exchanges these falsehoods, the stereotypes of “falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion,” or “remaining even for ever with her mother, and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study” (S&S 378), for reality. Marianne

finds herself, “at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village” (S&S 378-379).

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny’s resolution is similarly left to the imagination of the reader. Once again the narrative comes to a close with the narrator subsuming into an almost brusque conclusion, all the silences that have proliferated over the course of the narrative. The reader’s imagination must supply the details of the happy ending. When it becomes clear that Edmund has transferred his feelings from Mary Crawford—now proven as amoral as her brother—to Fanny, the narrator simply “entreat[s] everybody to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire” (MP 470). The narrator once again relies on our ability to have “read” and understood the emotional realities inherent in the silences that have accumulated throughout the narrative. Though they have gone unarticulated, Fanny’s heart’s desire is here invoked.

Timid, anxious, doubting as she was, it was still impossible that such tenderness as hers should not, at times, hold out the strongest hope of success, though it remained for a later period to tell him the whole delightful and astonishing truth. His happiness in knowing himself to have been so long the beloved of such a heart, must have been great enough to warrant any strength of language in which he could clothe it to her or to himself; it must have been a delightful happiness. But there was happiness elsewhere which no description can reach. Let no one presume to give the feelings of a young woman on receiving the assurance of that affection of which she has scarcely allowed herself to entertain a hope. (MP 471).

This passage specifically recollects the silence that has burdened Fanny throughout the novel: the ineffability of emotions, and the inability to “clothe” them in speech.

Finally, Anne’s resolution in *Persuasion*, is to some extent more explicit, being tied to a letter. The letter, as a physical artifact and linguistic representation of true emotions, provides a break in the oppressive silence between Anne and Captain Wentworth. She for whom the silences have been most severe and costly, receives the most satisfying expression of ardor represented in clear linguistic form.

They exchanged again those feelings and those promises which had once before seemed to secure everything, but which had been followed by so many, many years of division and estrangement. There they returned again into the past, more exquisitely happy, perhaps, in their re-union, than when it had been first projected; more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment; more equal to act, more justified in acting. And there, as they slowly paced the gradual ascent, [...] they could indulge in those retrospections and acknowledgements, and especially in those explanations of what had directly preceded the present moment, which were so poignant and so ceaseless in interest. (P 240-241)

Though the narrator and Anne stay within the social lexicon, never using language to directly express feelings, the effect of those feelings is most deeply explored in the resolution of this particular novel. After such rich and completely private conversation, the narrator simply asks, “Who can be in doubt of what followed?” (P 248). The implication here is, as it is in *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*, that the reader should already have gleaned from the silences,

the blanks, the narrator's showing through telling, all the emotional nuances that have lead to this moment.

According to Wolfgang Iser, the meaning of any text is made in the reading. And the text on the page becomes meaningful as we both appreciate what is there and interpret what is not.

He writes:

What *is* said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to meaning. But as the unsaid comes to life in the reader's imagination, so the said "expands" to take on greater significance than might have been supposed [...]

Whenever the reader bridges the gaps, communication begins. The gaps function as a kind of pivot on which the whole text-reader relationship revolves.

(Iser 168-169)

Austen relies on this implied relationship between reader and text. Our "expansions" upon the written text come alive in the conclusions of each novel. As the narrator explicitly absents information from the text, as she tells us that it may all be left to our imaginations, she invokes the reader to fill in for the failings of a system that cannot truly penetrate emotions; that system is language itself.

The most basic point of interest for any literary scholar is the power of "language arts" to communicate observation, argument, and truth, and ultimately to endlessly inspire interpretation. Writers act upon that potential energy of language, and readers, in the very "act of reading," transform it into the kinetic energy of meaning. When we are gifted with the works of a particularly talented author, the potential energy resting on the pages is a force of cultural,

intellectual, and fundamentally linguistic significance. Mountains of scholarship on the novels of Jane Austen attest to the latent potential of her literary work, and each written analysis renews the process of potential to kinetic energy of interpretation in the act of writing, reading, and writing again.

On it goes, and this thesis project is no different. As I have shown, the silences in Austen's novels are complex and deeply meaningful. They are as much a part of the text as the words that appear on the page; we read through the medium of language, we read its absence, and Austen acts upon those absences to communicate in the same way she relies on language and lexicon to convey her meaning. Many critics have noted these silences; Jane Nardin argues for a reading of Austen through the social rules of decorum to find the "rhetorical irony" of her narrator that indicates Austen's project and sense of morality; Stuart Tave, Tony Tanner, and James Thompson are all most interested in Jane Austen's relationship with language a variously limited but revelatory medium; Elaine Bander, in her all-too-short essay on the uses of silence in Jane Austen, argues that the uses of silence in Austen demonstrates an interest in moral action, reflection and observation. These are, of course, just a few. Each critical work has added to the potential energy of Austen's prose, but a comprehensive reader-response analysis of Austen's narrator especially remains wanting.

While writing this essay, I have felt split between the analysis of the heroine and the narrator as speaker, and am driven to continue this work in the hopes of gleaning an even more comprehensive and nuanced sense of Austen's use of silence. I find myself still wanting to explore the distinctions between narrator silence and character silence. Since the interplay of those two elements is the prime mover of the plot, further study would focus on how each novel

is shaped. How can we map the shape and trajectory of these novels through an examination of silence? Where and when in the course of the plot is silence most heavily influential?

Furthermore, can we change the way we traditionally see the gossips and bad speakers of Austen's novels as breaks in her commitment to the proper lexicon? How do we read free indirect discourse through a reader-response theoretical framework? And of course finally, how does such a thesis argument apply to the other novels of Jane Austen?

In 1983, Sissela Bok followed up her philosophical book *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* with an exploration of secrecy. In *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, Bok argues that secrets are neither forces of evil nor good. While they have the potential to function as either, secrets are at their core merely that which is intentionally concealed. According to Bok, secrets are many-faceted expressions of many forms of the socially or personally exalted, dangerous, shameful, and/or prohibited. While they can be burdens, potential for betrayal, and even oppressive, they can also protect liberty, autonomy, and guard intimacy and loyalty. Ultimately, Sissela Bok argues that our secrets—that is to say the decisions and discernments we as individuals make about what information to share and with whom—indicate and fundamentally shape the boundaries of our private and public lives. As Bok puts it, “Not until children develop some rudimentary understanding of the separateness—their own or that of their group—and of lasting identity can they experience secrecy” (Bok 30). Such experience requires a sense of selfhood, or in Bok's terms, an “enduring private realm” (Bok 30).

Thus Bok argues for a foundational relationship between secrets and the self, and the control over secrecy is a “safety valve for individuals in the midst of public life” (Bok 20). In other words, secrets allow us to wield some influence over how social exchanges play out. Bok's

understanding of secrecy promotes for some a sense of identity, survival and even sanity. While they are manipulatable and sometimes manipulative practices, secrets and the silences they enact are, for Elinor, Marianne, Fanny and Anne, a necessary tool for self-protection in the most literal sense.

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