Refusal to Tell: Withholding Heroines in Hawthorne, Wharton, and Coetzee

Elizabeth Alsop

Early in *The Scarlet Letter*, Reverend Dimmesdale is tasked with prevailing upon Hester Prynne’s “hardness and obstinacy”: “Exhort her to repentance, and to confession,” Governor Bellingham begs, and Reverend Wilson echoes the appeal: “Exhort her to confess the truth!” (Hawthorne 1991, 66, 67). Despite his interest in preserving Hester’s silence, the guilt-stricken Dimmesdale does his best to comply. “I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer!” he commands, and urges her: “Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him. . . . What can thy silence do for him, except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin?” (67). In spite of these exhortations, Hawthorne’s heroine remains silent (“I will not speak!” she cries) (68). Yet what is interesting is not that Dimmesdale fails to make his case, but rather, how he
attempts to make it. For implicit in his appeal is the assumption, however tacit, that Hester’s silence is not simply a show of willfulness, of “hardness and obstinacy,” but a deliberate strategy, one which might yield the very real results of ‘tempting’ or ‘compelling’ (66). Where Dimmesdale errs, and where even sympathetic readers of Hester’s silence have also erred, is in considering only what this silence might “do for him,” rather than for Hester herself (67).

What, then, does Hester hope to accomplish with her silence? In contradistinction to similarly unconfessing female characters in the Anglophone tradition, such as Henry James’s Isabelle Archer or Toni Morrison’s Sethe, Hester refuses to speak not out of self-interest, but despite it: when the stakes for keeping quiet are at their highest. Equally noteworthy is that her silence is voluntary and not, as in the case of, say, *The Yellow Wallpaper*’s protagonist, forcibly induced—although it is true that even this ‘voluntary’ choice is circumscribed by external constraints. Most interesting, however, is that Hester’s is not an isolated case. As this essay will argue, Hester represents a distinct class of withholding heroines, one whose members choose silence both deliberately and under duress. In fact, her closest counterparts emerge from what might seem at first glance like incongruous sources: Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, novels whose obvious stylistic differences might obscure the fact that they, too, revolve around intentional acts of female withholding. Like Hester, Wharton’s Lily Bart and Coetzee’s Lucy Lurie find themselves in various states of ‘disgrace,’ ‘ignominy,’ or ‘shame.’ And like her, they refuse, in Lucy’s words, to “tell what happened,” to answer to the diverse charges publicly levied against them (Coetzee 1999, 99). That all three heroines pay dearly for their decisions, however, prompts the question as to why they suffer in silence rather than vindicate themselves in speech.

This essay will suggest that one possible answer is that such reticence may in fact constitute a form of resistance. It is an idea that has been provocatively raised by Barbara Johnson, who in her reading of Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993) argues that muteness can represent “a form of resistance and subjecthood” (1998, 143). On the one hand, there remains considerable difficulty in reconciling this possibility with the early feminist imperative memorably articulated by Hélène Cixous, that woman must “break out of the snare of silence” (1976, 881). Yet while silence and silencing remain fraught tropes in feminist theory, one should be wary of too reflexively accepting the negative connotations they have accrued. For one, Hester, Lily, and Lucy do not fit the paradigm of the silenced heroine; unlike Philomela, say, or Virginia Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, their voices are not stifled, but actively sought out. Moreover, in contrast to more recent cinematic analogues (such as Campion’s Ada McGrath, or Elisabeth Vogler in Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona*) their silence is not only elective but selective, adopted only in response to
highly specific events. In this sense, the three heroines would seem to complicate the voice–silence binary that has long obtained in feminist thought.4

At the same time, to suggest that muteness be linked to empowerment risks merely inverting this binary. The point, then, is not to suggest that female silence is necessarily symbolic of resistance, any more than that it needs be an emblem of defeat. Rather, what this essay hopes to demonstrate is that strategic withholding of the sort practiced by these fictional subjects may serve to oppose something more specific: not patriarchy, per se, so much as the plots of female culpability, contrition, and tragedy that it endorses and enforces. In this light, one can begin to perceive the expressive potential of the heroines’ silence: to see it as an act of narrative non-cooperation, a means, however makeshift, of protesting the normative sequencing, the “proairetic” coding of their lives.5 And without insisting on a progressive trajectory for these texts, it is nonetheless possible to discern meaningful distinctions among them. If Hester, for one, tries to frustrate plot, and Lily, to manufacture an alternative to it, Lucy might qualify as post-plot, as having eluded narrativization altogether.

I. “That matter remaineth a riddle”: Hester’s Unintelligible Plot

Critics have offered numerous explanations for Hester’s silence, reading it variously as an act of revenge, a sign of civil disobedience, or a token of “honor among thieves” (Pringle 2007, 36). Most intriguing, however, may be the interpretation Dimmesdale himself offers. Gazing at Hester, he murmurs, “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart! She will not speak!” (Hawthorne 1991, 68). Whether Dimmesdale is right in thinking that Hester holds back out of “generosity” for him, or whether, as seems more likely, he misreads the gesture, choosing to construe it in the manner most accommodating to his own desires, his interpretation serves the purpose of dramatizing what Barbara Johnson has taught us to recognize as the traditional attitude towards women’s silence (1998, 150). By idealizing female muteness, Johnson argues, the man places himself in the position of the prostrate idolater, and paradoxically, reclaims the power as “victim” that he may have lost as (failed) sexual aggressor (153). And Dimmesdale, who has lost Hester, does seem guilty of fetishizing her silence. “Hush, Hester!” he begs, during an intimate colloquy in the woods; later, in his final moments on the scaffold, he offers a similar rebuke: “Hush, Hester, hush!” (Hawthorne 1991, 154, 196).

However, if Dimmesdale participates in this “aesthetic tradition,” Hawthorne, it seems, does not (Johnson 1998, 150). Indeed a closer look at the initial pillory scene suggests that Hester’s muteness works to upset male ideals, rather than support them. As Hester stands on the scaffold, the as-yet unidentified Chillingworth calls to her: “‘Speak woman!’ said another voice,
coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold. ‘Speak; and give your child a father!’” (Hawthorne 1991, 68). Ostensibly, what Chillingworth seeks is the name of Hester’s “fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer” (67). Yet what he and the other clergy are after is less a single name than a sense of narratological certainty—an ending to Hester’s open-ended plot. From a narrative standpoint, to “give [the] child a father” would be to give the story of Hester and Pearl both structural and semantic closure. As Michael Pringle points out, it would also be to endorse the official “reading” of events, or to “validate the signification the magistrates put on the A” (2007, 36). By publically identifying Hester’s co-protagonist, the magistrates hope to lend transgressive events the reassuringly familiar shape of an adultery plot: to consolidate the free-play of signification into a single signified.

That complicated plights risk being reduced to conventional plots is a danger of which Hester herself is clearly aware. Minutes after her public pil­lorying, Hester is already pondering the possibility that over the “accumu­lating days, and added years . . . she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might viv­ify and embody their images of woman’s frailty and sinful passion.” Hester, then, suspects how readily the “preacher and moralist” might transform the particulars of her life into a parable, and in the process, coerce her into “giv­ing up her individuality” (Hawthorne 1991, 74). And her suspicions are soon confirmed. Upon entering the church, for instance, we learn that “it was often [Hester’s] mishap to find herself the text of the discourse” (79). In this sense, she shares the “fear” that Susan Gubar has attributed to Chaucer’s Criseyde, that “she will be ‘rolled on many a tongue!’” (1981, 245), and as she is, most explicitly, by the gossipy goodwives waiting at the prison door. In just the first few chapters, Hawthorne would seem to go out of his way to show­case the degraded tenor of public speech, a pattern which suggests he may succeed in doing what Frances Restuccia claims Wharton attempted in The House of Mirth: “to counterpose gossip and the law, the female and male ver­sions of reductive storytelling” (1994, 408). It is precisely this sort of “reduc­tive storytelling” that Hester’s silence seems designed to resist. If she cannot curtail such narrative reduction, she can, at least, refuse to collude in it.

That silence is a strategy of Hester’s choosing rather than a default pos­ture is supported by the fact that she does speak in the text, and, by her own account, has spoken in the past. “Though knowest that I was frank with thee!” she reminds Chillingworth, shortly after their reunion (Hawthorne 1991, 72). And her impassioned plea to the Governor—in which she “raise[s] her voice almost to a shriek”—proves that Hester is not lacking for a voice (98). Indeed, it is worth noting that both this entreaty, which, as Leland Person reminds us, is “the only public speech of any length she makes in the
novel,” and her more private appeal to Dimmesdale are uniformly persuasive (1989, 476). One cannot help but notice, however, that such displays of rhetorical strength are often accompanied by corollary shows of weakness. During her discussion with the governor, for instance, Hester is forced to turn to Dimmesdale for what Wharton’s Sim Rosedale, speaking to Lily, will refer to as “backing”: “Speak thou for me!” she cries (Hawthorne 1991, 98). And as Jamie Barlowe has pointed out, there is a tendency for Hester’s “few ‘noisy’ moments” to be rapidly re-appropriated by the men around her—used to energize or embolden their own speech acts (1997, 199). In light of these examples, one might say that The Scarlet Letter dramatizes not only “the aesthetic tradition of women’s silence” that Johnson describes, but its transgression—namely, “what happens when women attempt to break that silence” (1998, 137).

Yet the novel seems more interested in what happens when women don’t break their silence, and paradoxically, obtain power as a result. Person, for one, has taken an initial step towards theorizing this “power,” arguing that Hester “discovers a third alternative to speech or the silence of the symbolic: a vengeful silence that has the effect of action” (1989, 470). But while he usefully deconstructs the dichotomy between speech and silence in the novel, he seems not to have considered the possibility that Hester’s silence might serve some purpose other than “revenge.” Why must Hester be empowered only to (re)enact a prototypically male plot? Instead, her refusal to talk could easily be read otherwise: as a means of contravening plot and opposing its progress, rather than commandeering it for her own purposes.

In fact, if Hester’s silence “forms the plot” of the novel, it also deforms it, obviating what would otherwise be a rather Aristotelian trajectory (Person 1989, 466). Her refusal to identify either Dimmesdale or Chillingworth, for instance, not only prolongs the plot (straining unities of time and action, if not place) but threatens to foil it altogether, by stymieing requisite scenes of reversal and recognition. Indeed, had it not been for Dimmesdale’s last-minute confession, Hester might have succeeded in subverting tragic convention: denying her audience (through the planned flight to England) either the catharsis of the Classical tragedy or the consummation of the Elizabethan one. Silence, of course, can certainly be used to heighten drama (one thinks, for instance, of Cassandra’s prolonged muteness in Aeschylus’s Agamemnon), but in Hawthorne’s text, it more often works to deflate it. It is by keeping quiet, after all, that Hester frustrates the public’s prurient desire for details during the pillory scene, and that she denies her detractors further opportunities for schadenfreude.

In short, one could argue that Hester’s withholding serves to thwart the progress of the tragic plot that has been prepared for her. In this sense, she
could be seen as the seventeenth-century American counterpart of Homer’s Penelope, engaged in a similarly successful act of undoing. If, as Peggy Kamuf has suggested, such unweaving “is not a terribly clever trick,” it is nonetheless an effective one (1982, 6). Indeed, from a purely linguistic standpoint, it would be hard to overestimate the disruptive effects of verbal withholding. If, as J.L. Austin has argued, “expositives”—locutionary acts like stating, answering, or explaining—serve the crucial function of “clarifying . . . reasons, arguments, and communications,” it follows that their absence would serve the inverse function of not clarifying, of actually obfuscating “communications” (1975, 163). The implication is that one might not only “do things with words,” in Austin’s well-known phrase, but without them. Silence, in this sense, could have its own perlocutive effects.

Ultimately, however, it may be Pearl and not Hester who best dramatizes such obfuscatory potential. Unlike her mother, Pearl does speak. Yet like the letter, to which she is frequently and explicitly allied, she “both demands and defies interpretation” (Pringle 2007, 31). From the first, Hawthorne foregrounds Pearl as a site of hermeneutic confusion: she casts a “bewildering and baffling spell”; she has an “incomprehensible intelligence” (Hawthorne 1991, 84); she is prone to looks “so intelligent, yet inexplicable, so perverse” (83); and she acts, we learn, “more from caprice than necessity” (89). So exceptional is any sign of a discernible logic to Pearl’s behavior that her mother is moved to remark on the occasion when “there was at least an intelligible earnestness in the mood, instead of the fitful caprice that so often thwarted her in the child’s manifestations” (85). It seems like no coincidence, then, that it is Pearl—the least “intelligible” character—who finally succeeds in escaping the confines of the Puritanical plot. For if, as Pringle has suggested, it is the “indeterminacy” of Hester’s letter that “enables her to exploit a weakness in the punitive, politically imposed emblem her community uses to discipline her,” one could say that it is Pearl’s constitutional indeterminacy that allows her to similarly expose and “exploit” the weakness in the larger regulatory system by which she and her mother would be governed (2007, 33).

Thus, while Gubar (1981) has argued that it is not enough to be an enigma—a “riddle” like Hester, an oddity like Pearl—The Scarlet Letter implies that inscrutability may have practical as well as symbolic advantages. In “The Blank Page,” Gubar draws attention to a desultory tradition of female characters “endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality” (1981, 247). Yet in The Scarlet Letter, we confront two heroines who endow themselves with “contradictory meaning”—either through the withholding of speech (in Hester’s case) or the scrambling of its codes (in Pearl’s)—as a means of resisting absorption into the compromising realm of discourse that, Hawthorne implies, is a primary site of mystification.
Entreatyng Hester to confess, Dimmesdale’s “tremulously sweet, rich, deep, and broken” voice has the effect of bringing the listeners “into one accord of sympathy” (Hawthorne 1991, 67). It is precisely that sort of singular “accord” that Hester seeks to resist, even at the cost of estrangement. As Ernest Baughman once observed, the “Puritan emphasis on public confession” would have necessarily precluded the non-confessor from taking part in society: “lacking confession, the sinner ceases to be a part of that society, or he is so much at odds with it that his functioning is seriously impaired” (1967, 539, 540). And clearly, Hester’s non-confession is not without its costs, personal and material, as well as social. But better “impaired” functioning in society, Hawthorne implies, than a too-seamless integration in it. In a world where public discourse serves an inescapably homogenizing function, abstaining from it begins to seem, if not an unproblematic solution, than at least like a defensible one.

II. “What is your story?”: Lily’s Improvised Account

By the second half of *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart has, like Hester Prynne, become something of a pariah: a fixture of *Town Talk*, and figuratively, if not literally, “branded as the heroine of a ‘queer’ episode” (Wharton 1985, 234). More striking, however, is how similarly these two characters, situated centuries and social worlds apart, choose to respond to their public ‘branding.’ Like Hester, Lily refuses to explain the circumstances of her precipitous fall, despite the fact that disclosure would likely have guaranteed her acquittal. Unlike Hawthorne’s heroine, however, Wharton’s does not rely solely on silence to mount her opposition, but instead makes use of a more varied arsenal of rhetorical strategies.

One begins to understand more about Lily’s methods during her decisive confrontation with Bertha Dorset, an episode that proves to be the tipping point in Lily’s social demise. As the ramifications of Bertha’s scheme sink in, Lily realizes that “Bertha was pursuing an object, following a line she had marked out for herself” (Wharton 1985, 208). What Lily is truly coming to terms with, however, is the fact that she has inadvertently played a role in Bertha’s plot—helped her in “following [her] line.” It is a role not unlike the one Hester was pressed into performing, that of the sexual transgressor or “scarlet” woman. And like Hester, Lily appears to accept the label with an oddly stoical reserve: “Lily sat silent, taking the brunt of it quietly, letting it spend itself on her to the last drop of its accumulated falseness; then, without a word, she rose and went down to her cabin” (208–209). The difference is that unlike Hester, Lily knows the charges levied against her to be false. The question, then, is why Lily should choose to accept them so “quietly,” and to stifle the words it was “on [her] lips to exclaim” (208). Her silence is partic-
ularly puzzling, given how “completely” Lily, as Rosedale will remind her, has her accuser Bertha “in [her] power” (257).

For some critics, this failure to explain constitutes nothing less than Lily’s tragic flaw. Elaine Showalter, for one, laments “Lily’s inability to speak for herself,” and Barbara Hochman sees Lily as even more radically compromised: a “storytelling failure,” undone by her “lack of attention to the shape of her own story” (Showalter 1985, 136; Hochman 2004, 277, 292). More convincing is Frances Restuccia’s reading of Lily as dead-set against reducing her “irreducible” story (1994, 408). But even she emphasizes Lily’s helplessness in the face of this “conundrum”: the fact that she remains “[u]nable to articulate her origin, and equally unable to explain the impossibility of articulating such an aporia” (408).

A closer reading of the novel, however, suggests that Lily may not be a deficient storyteller so much as a reluctant one. Proof of her sound knowledge of narrative convention—of plot—surfaces early in the novel, when “the sight of the grey dress and the borrowed prayer-book” in Lily’s room at Bellomont suddenly “flashed a long light down the years”:

She would have to go to church with Percy Gryce every Sunday. They would have a front pew in the most expensive church in New York, and his name would figure handsomely in the list of parish charities. In a few years, when he grew stouter, he would be made a warden. Once in the winter the rector would come to dine, and her husband would beg her to go over the list and see that no divorcées were included, except those who had showed signs of penitence by being re-married to the very wealthy. (Wharton 1985, 57)

What is fascinating about Lily’s reverie is not just what she imagines, but how she imagines, since the form of her vision reveals a certain intuitive grasp of narrative structure. Indeed, one is struck by how closely Lily’s fictional projection corresponds to Susan Winnett’s definition of “plot”:

Plot . . . sees a particular action in the light of what it will have meant at a future moment that it is simultaneously determining and resisting. Plot registers the extent to which the protagonist can, through any particular action or sequence of actions, take possession of the totality of a life yet unled. It is a mode, we might say, of individual proleptic retrospection. (Winnett 1990, 515)

Based on Winnett’s criteria, Lily is a more than proficient plotter: someone who has mastered the “mode . . . of individual proleptic retrospection” that allows her to “[see] a particular action” (her marriage to Percy Gryce) “in the light of what it will have meant at a future moment” (1990, 515). In this sense, Lily’s chilling vision seems proof enough that she has the ability, if not the inclination, to plot.
Considering how skillfully Lily maps her life in these opening chapters, it seems difficult to then conclude that she lacks “a sense of plot, of how to structure and articulate one’s story” (Hochman 2004, 276). Indeed, it is worth remembering that Lily does “articulate” her story, albeit late in the novel. Over tea with Sim Rosedale, Lily is suddenly seized by an “eager communicativeness,” and by the conviction that he would be “the fitting person to receive and transmit her version of the facts” (Wharton 1985, 292). Yet while she feels a “momentary exhilaration at the thought of thus relieving herself of her detested secret” (similar, perhaps, to the joy Hester feels in unburdening herself to Dimmesdale), this fleeting ecstasy gives way to a more lasting sense of regret: “the sensation gradually faded in the telling, and as she ended her pallor was suffused with the deep blush of misery.” Given Lily’s “passionate desire that some one should know the truth,” why should “the telling” of it be such a source of “misery” (292)?

Once again, what this passage suggests is not that Lily cannot tell her story, but that she doesn’t want to; or better, doesn’t want to have to. One thinks here not of Hester, but of Dimmesdale, who laments that he should have to explain himself in words: “‘Could there be plainer speech than this?’” he wonders, of his wracked and wasted body (Hawthorne 1991, 119). In fact, Lily’s reluctance to verbalize recalls a work published just seven years before *The House of Mirth*, and which raises similar concerns about disclosure and withholding: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. In the story’s preface, the narrator and assembled guests prod Douglas, the proprietor of the governess’s manuscript, for details about her tale:

“Who was she in love with?”
“‘The story will tell,’ I took upon myself to reply.
“Oh I can’t wait for the story!”
“The story won’t tell,” said Douglas; “not in any literal vulgar way.” (James 1999, 3)

Most striking about this excerpt is the preference it manifests for showing over “telling,” or at least, telling of the “literal, vulgar” variety. And while this preference is clearly attributed to Douglas, it is difficult not to also ascribe it to James, whose writing reveals a similar commitment to indirect, allusive, or un-literal narration. In fact, literalness will be similarly linked to vulgarity once again in the text, when the young charge, Flora, undergoes a violent transformation: “she was literally, she was hideously hard; she had turned common and almost ugly,” the governess observes; a few lines later, she compares Flora’s comportment to “that of a vulgarly pert little girl in the street” (1999, 70).

There is something about literalness, then, that strikes the governess as “hideous,” “vulgar,” “common,” and “almost ugly.” And perhaps it strikes Lily
Bart that way as well. Like Douglas and Dimmesdale before her, Lily seems to share the conviction that there is something “vulgar” or unseemly about too-literal explication. Further supporting this hypothesis is the regret Lily feels after telling Rosedale her story, which she does “clearly, deliberately, with pauses between the sentences”—that is, as literally as possible (Wharton 1985:292). In fact, the idea that she should find something distasteful in the act of exposition is in keeping with critical perceptions of both Lily and Wharton’s sensibility. Showalter, for one, has referred to “Lily’s ladylike self-silencing,” and attributes her “inability to speak” to a fastidiousness of manners and mores whose demise Wharton was deliberately staging in the novel (1985: 136).

Yet the constraints on Lily’s speech may be less self-imposed than Showalter suggests. As Lily explains to Gerty Farish, “‘the truth about any girl is that once she’s talked about she’s done for; and the more she explains her case the worse it looks’” (Wharton 1985, 226). And paradoxical though Lily’s logic may seem, it is not at all uncommon in the novel; as Mrs. Peniston reasons, apropos of her niece’s case, “[i]t was horrible of a young girl to let herself be talked about; however unfounded the charges against her, she must be to blame for their having been made” (127). This rationale finds further corroboration in literary history, which, as Johnson points out, is replete with heroines who in protesting “at all,” already, in Queen Gertrude’s phrase, protest too much: “Overdetermined by the aesthetic tradition of women’s silence,” Johnson explains, “any speech at all appears as guilty speech” (1998, 137). In light of such evidence, it seems possible to interpret Lily’s reluctance to “explain her case” less as a sign of personal fastidiousness, than as a symptom of her frustration with prejudicially gendered economies of speech (226). Why bother to talk, Lily’s comments to Gerty imply, if your words are destined to be misunderstood?

Like Hester, then, Lily faces a problem not only of articulation but reception. It is precisely the sort of discursive double-bind Hélène Cixous describes in “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

> Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away—that’s how daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine. (Cixous 1976, 880–1)

One could argue that it is this “double distress” that stymies Lily, and leads to her inability to confront Lawrence Selden. For despite Gerty’s assurances, Lily doesn’t seem to believe that “if I went to him, if I told him everything,”
he would truly hear or “understand” her (Wharton 1985, 166). And Sim Rosedale, for his part, seems less interested in listening to her plans than he is in encouraging her “gradual acquiescence” to his own (259). Given how readily his filibuster succeeds in lulling Lily into “a state of tranced subservience,” Wharton, like Hawthorne, seems intent on dramatizing the dangerously seductive quality of male discourse (260):

He paused long enough to draw breath, but not to give her time for the expression of her gathering resistance; and as he pressed on, expounding and elucidating his idea with the directness of the man who has no doubts of his cause, she found the indignation gradually freezing on her lip, found herself held fast in the grasp of his argument by the mere cold strength of its presentation. (Wharton 1985, 258)

Although this speech, with its “mere cold strength,” would seem to have little in common with Dimmesdale’s sonorous cadences, Rosedale here seems improbably invested with the same powers of persuasion: the ability, like the Reverend, to lure his listeners “into one accord of sympathy” (Hawthorne 1991, 67). Even more interesting is Lily’s response to such rhetoric, for she meets Rosedale’s bluster—just as Hester met Dimmesdale’s—with a prolonged and articulate silence, which “might have expressed either mockery or a half-reluctant respect for his candor” (Wharton 1985, 256). Like Hawthorne, Wharton thus reveals an awareness of the expressive registers of silence: its power as a means not just of passive resistance, but of active critique.

The problem, then, may be less that Lily is unable to speak for herself, as Showalter suggests, than that she understands how much is at stake when she—when any woman—attempts to do so (1985, 136). That she possesses this degree of awareness is evidenced by her pivotal conversation with Gerty, who is the first to encourage Lily to tell “her story”:

Miss Farish still fixed her with an anxious gaze. “But what is your story, Lily? I don’t believe any one knows it yet.”

“My story?—I don’t believe I know it myself. You see I never thought of preparing a version in advance as Bertha did—and if I had, I don’t think I should take the trouble to use it now.” (Wharton 1985, 226; emphasis in original)

On the one hand, this passage is fascinating for what it reveals about Lily’s understanding of “story,” as something “prepared in advance,” designed for “use,” and available, apparently, in many readily adaptable “version[s]” (226). Like “truth,” a concept Lily has just complicated in her previous retort, “story” is treated as an equally artificial and socially-mediated construct. At the risk of over-reading, one could even see Lily’s comments here as a critique of narrative convention, an attempt to call attention to the ‘prepared’ nature of stories, and thus, to disabuse Gerty of any faith in their transparency.
In this light, it may be no accident that Lily answers her questions with more questions (“The whole truth?”; “My story?”; “From the beginning?”) (226). For her incredulity seems designed to highlight the absurdities of the narrative enterprise, and to denaturalize the conventions that govern normative modes of telling.

That Lily’s responses may conceal a more submerged message, however, becomes increasingly clear as the scene progresses. Gerty, frustrated by her friend’s flippancy, continues to press Lily to talk:

“I don’t want a version prepared in advance—but I want you to tell me exactly what happened from the beginning.”

“From the beginning?” Miss Bart gently mimicked her. “Dear Gerty, how little imagination you good people have!” (Wharton 1985, 226)

Lily, here, makes no secret of her disdain for the narrative project, and will go on to mock the very possibility of locating a “beginning” to her troubles (“‘In my cradle. . . . Or no. . . . I’ll say it was in my blood. . . .’”) (226). While Hochman has hypothesized that such equivocations reflect Lily’s inability to articulate her own origins, once again, it seems possible to discern a more deliberate motive for Lily’s evasions (2004). For in fact, Lily’s reluctance to identify an incipit for her story may derive from an awareness that, as Peter Brooks has argued, “the sense of a beginning . . . must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending” (1984, 94). In other words, Lily may laugh off the possibility of a beginning precisely because she knows it necessarily presumes an end—the very thing she has been so indefatigably trying to forestall. As Wharton herself once wrote, “my last page is always latent in my first” (Wharton 1998, 208). And it seems possible that she may have imputed to her heroine a similar degree of narratological insight: the sense that ‘last pages’ are “always latent in” (or in Brooks’s term, ‘presupposed’ by) first ones (1984, 93). In this sense, Lily might deprecate a beginning so as to avoid what is increasingly shaping up to be a tragic end.

If Lily arguably meets such an end, that should not devalue her efforts to resist or revise it. Indeed, rather than simply impeding plot as Hester does, there are hints that Lily tries, however futilely, to fashion an alternative to it. From the first pages of the novel, Wharton continually emphasizes her heroine’s improvisatory talents, which contrast so starkly with Bertha’s far more conventional mode of plotting. From her spontaneous tea with Seldon, to her chance encounters with Gryce, Rosedale, and Nell, Lily is clearly inclined to digression. Indeed, the distinction she makes between walking and driving (“sometimes the pedestrian enjoys the diversion of a short cut which is denied to those on wheels”) seems to metaphorically express her preference for less linear trajectories. In this affinity for ‘diversions’ and ‘short cuts,’ for “trudging it on foot” over “roll[ing] . . . in a carriage,” one recog-
nizes Lily’s desire to maneuver freely, to diverge from established and well-traveled paths, and plots (Wharton 1985, 56).

Not unlike Emma Bovary, then, Lily “was beginning to have fits of angry rebellion against fate”: to chafe against the line she has been constrained to follow (Wharton 1985, 39). Yet unlike Emma, Lily is not naïve enough to believe there is really a rosier elsewhere. It is Selden, after all, who dreams of transporting Lily to some unspecified “beyond”: “He knew what was in it before he broke the seal—a grey seal with *Beyond!* beneath a flying ship. Ah, he would take her beyond” (154). For Lily, by contrast, such digressions as the “pedestrian” can take are only ever temporary detours, not permanent ways out, as the conclusion of the novel seems to confirm (56). And yet even Lily’s tragic end need not negate the value of her struggle to avoid it. As Alison Booth has argued, “the premature closure of the female quest plot . . . does not close the play of discourse along with the story” (1993, 2). Lily may die in the book’s conclusion—her “story” may end—but the “discourse” surrounding it, and her, does not; in fact, it remains remarkably unsettled. Though Selden believes he has “constructed an explanation of the mystery,” he concedes that this construction remains partial: “That was all he knew—all he could hope to unravel of the story. The mute lips on the pillow refused him more than this” (Wharton 1985, 329; emphasis added). At the same time, by leaving behind those two envelopes (a paper trail as semiotically rich as it is ambiguous), Lily signals her movement, however subtle, beyond mere “muteness,” and thus beyond the choice between either cooperative speech or resistant silence. If Lily, then, has not dodged death, that most conventional of literary fates, she has at least escaped the sort of closed ending, the stock plot, she struggled to avoid.

III. “A more convenient shape for processing”: Lucy’s Inconvenient Truths

Like *The Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Mirth*, J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* centers around a pattern of female withholding: the heroine Lucy’s refusal to report the rape she has suffered at the hands of three men. Unlike Hester and Lily, however, Lucy is the victim of a crime, rather than the alleged perpetrator of one; and since that crime is rape, an act whose representation has historically been characterized by a “rhetoric of elision,” her silence poses significantly greater interpretive difficulties (Higgins and Silver, 1991). In this context, is it even possible (or desirable) to read Lucy’s non-confession as part of a deliberate plan? Or does the novel demand that we see it otherwise, as a sign of women’s continuing subjugation?

Readers have debated this question since the novel’s publication, and have been almost unanimous in condemning Lucy’s decision not to speak. Elleke Boehmer, for one, laments Lucy’s “unquestioning acceptance of her
suffering,” and concludes that such silence cannot be read otherwise than as proof of victimization (2006, 144). Seen in this light, Lucy “embodies not only the stereotype of the wronged, muted woman,” but an even more allegorically over-determined figure, “the abused and to-be-again abused of history . . . the figure of a double silence” (145). While Lucy Valerie Graham, by contrast, allows that “female silence in Coetzee’s previous novels could be linked to ‘the power to withhold,’” she does not accord Lucy’s silence the same potential, noting that her “refusal to speak about her experience certainly does not empower her and means that her story belongs to her rapists” (2003, 442). Even Derek Attridge, who usefully places Lucy’s refusal in its political and historical context, seems ultimately to demote it from the status of deliberate choice to instinctive gesture, proof of Lucy’s “survival strategy of pragmatic accommodation whatever the cost” (2000, 111).

Perhaps most surprising, however, is how closely critical readings of Lucy have aligned with the one provided by her father, David Lurie. Though commentators have not hesitated to “counterfocalize” against David’s point of view—a gesture Gayatri Spivak sees as a salutary, even necessary response to the novel’s narrow focalization—they have generally agreed with his tragic typing of his daughter. David’s views emerge most clearly in a letter he writes to Lucy:

> With all the love in the world, I must say the following. You are on the brink of a dangerous error. You wish to humble yourself before history. But the road you are following is the wrong one. It will strip you of all honour; you will not be able to live with yourself. I plead with you, listen to me. (Coetzee 1999, 160)

This interpretation of events is met with his daughter’s unequivocal rejection. “Dear David, You have not been listening to me,” Lucy begins:

> You do not see this, and I do not know what more I can do to make you see. It is as if you have chosen deliberately to sit in a corner where the rays of the sun do not shine. I think of you as one of the three chimpanzees, the one with his paws over his eyes. (Coetzee 1999, 161)

Lucy’s complaint that her father has been neither “seeing” nor “listening” recalls her earlier accusation that he has been “misreading” her, comments which in turn recall Cixous’s lament for “the deaf male ear” (Coetzee 1999, 112; Cixous 1976, 881). The question is whether readers have been guilty of a similar deafness. For even those most sensitive to the dynamics of David’s refusal to talk have been far less nuanced in their analysis of his daughter’s. Framed in the language of Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” one could say there has been a critical tendency to see Lucy as the “historically muted subject of the subaltern woman,” for whom one might wrongly presume to speak (1994, 91).
On the one hand, then, it is clear that the desire to recover Lucy’s story is a powerful one both for characters within the world of the novel, and for critics without. Yet the problem may lie in the mode of recovery, which as I demonstrate above, has tended more toward what Spivak would call speaking for Lucy, than speaking to her (1994, 91). A further concern is whether such readings, in their willingness to cast Lucy as a victim, might inadvertently promulgate the “social script,” the “gendered grammar of violence” which Sharon Marcus argues is complicit in perpetuating the sort of sexual assault the novel portrays (1992, 392). But what makes this strain of interpretive activity most troubling, perhaps, is that it contradicts the evidence of the novel, which suggests that Lucy, like Hester and Lily, actively resists cooption into other people’s plots and scripts. Her commitment to this kind of narrative autonomy becomes especially apparent in the immediate aftermath of the rape. As father and daughter prepare for the arrival of the police, Lucy asks David to respect her right not to tell—what he calls, apropos of his own case, “the freedom to remain silent” (188):

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats.

(“David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?”
He does not understand.

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats.

(Coetzee 1999, 99)

Readers have been quick to point out that, in fact, Lucy does not “tell what happened”—an accusation that once again seems to echo David’s own protestations (“‘Why aren’t you telling the whole story, Lucy?’”) (110). Overlooked, however, has been Lucy’s response to this charge: “I have told the whole story. The whole story is what I have told” (110). If readers, like David, have found this response ‘dubious,’ what needs to be considered is the possibility that Lucy, like Lily, may have a different definition of “story” (110). What if rape, to Lucy’s mind, is simply not narratable? What if it is best represented by the “double bed . . . stripped bare”—by the sort of allusive telling that Lucy’s male audience, like Lily’s, may not fully comprehend? In this sense, it is possible that Lucy is telling the “whole story”: all of what in her opinion can actually be told in words.

Indeed, one could go so far as to say that Lucy’s refusal to “tell” reveals her distrust not only of her father’s narrative, but of narrativity altogether. Like the religious sermons of Hester’s day or the Town Talk of Lily’s, verbal narratives in Disgrace seem to exert a singular form of social control. The extent to which narrative might appear to Lucy to serve a normative function is made explicit during a confrontation with David:

“You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance
until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. (Coetzee 1999, 198)

If Lucy remains suspicious of narrative conventions, however, David, the former professor of Modern Languages, is clearly in their debt. Indeed, the novel is rife with evidence of his reliance on literary terms and tropes. Confronted with Soraya’s disappearance, he notes the need “to close that chapter”; speaking with Petrus, he is surprised when the conversation does not conform to dialogic norms: “He pauses, waits, allows a silence to develop, a silence which Petrus ought to fill with the next question: And how is Lucy?” (9, 115). He repeatedly likens Lucy’s situation to an ambiguous text, which can be given various “readings” (118). And while dining at the Isaacs’s, he finally takes the liberty of imbuing her experience with the narrative cohesion he believes it lacks: “Stitched together in this way, the story unrolls without shadows” (170).

For David, the attraction of narrative may be precisely its capacity to explain, in the original sense of the word: to make flat or smooth, “without shadows” (Coetzee 1999, 170; see Oxford English Dictionary 2012). Indeed as we see, David attempts to “stitch together” his own story as seamlessly as he did Lucy’s (1999, 170). “You have heard Melanie’s side of the story,” he says to Mr. Isaacs, the father of the young student he has seduced. “I would like to give you mine . . .” (165):

It began without any premeditation on my part. It began as an adventure, one of those sudden little adventures that men of a certain kind have . . . I think of it as a fire. She struck up a fire in me . . . It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me. Not hot enough to burn me up, but real: real fire. (Coetzee 1999, 166)

Mr. Isaacs, it turns out, is not much interested in David’s side of things: “I ask myself what on earth you think you are up to, coming to my school and telling me stories” (166). What makes David’s ‘stories’ even more suspicious, however, is how closely they resemble the one that Ovid tells in his Metamorphoses, about Tereus’s rape of Philomela:

When he first saw her, Tereus caught fire as instantly as ripe grain or dry leaves, or hay stored in a barn goes up in blazes.
Her beauty surely justified such passion, but he was driven by an innate lust, a bent that Thracians have for lechery:
he burned with his and with his nation’s heat. . . .
Nothing at all he would not dare to do in his unbridled passion, so fierce the flames
The symmetry between the two accounts is striking. Like David, Tereus transgresses against the youth of his inamorata (“After he was done with her, she shuddered / like a young lamb, broken by an old grey wolf”); and like David, he does so while in locus parentis (Ovid 2004, ll. 756–58, 211). Most notably, both versions emphasize and even romanticize the “fiery” nature of the perpetrators’ passions, and present lust as an excuse for inexcusable actions. Whether David (or Coetzee) is ‘aware’ of these parallels is of course impossible to say. Yet regardless of whether one reads the passage as an accidental echo or a learned allusion, the similarities between David’s account and Tereus’s reflect narrative’s capacity to resolve singular events into standardized shapes. There is nothing new, in other words, about David’s “side” of the story. Indeed, one could say that this is less his story than an iteration of the story: the same old story of sexual violence, canonized by Ovid, but re-enacted twice within this novel alone.

In this sense, the novel suggests that narrative may not only naturalize events, but sanitize them as well. Like the apology David ostentatiously issues to the Isaacs, the story that he finally tells seems like a calculated ritual, a performance designed to net him some measure of moral credibility: “With careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor. Is that enough? He thinks. Will that do?” (Coetzee 1999, 173). If initially David scoffs at the idea of apology, and comments snidely, apropos of Melanie’s play, that “catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away,” the scene at the Isaacs’s reveals him to have reconsidered the benefits of this sort of ‘washing,’ and to have availed himself of rhetorical and poetic means to achieve it (23).

Yet if the goal of David’s narration is to incite catharsis, Lucy’s ‘performance,’ by contrast, would seem to have at its core the opposite principle. Juxtaposed with David’s long-winded explanation, Lucy’s lack of one suggests that she does not think that crimes can be so easily “washed away,” or that any verbal performance can ever be “enough” (Coetzee 1999, 23, 173). Given the historical moment in which the novel is set, her refusal to “tell what happened” could readily be seen as a commentary on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, whose methods Coetzee seems to allude to in his rendering of the college faculty committee (99). Yet if the novel ultimately discourages such a didactic reading, Lucy’s stubborn silence nonetheless conveys a certain skepticism about the ethics and efficacy of public confession. Indeed, in eliding the scene of Lucy’s rape, Coetzee himself practices a sort of principled withholding. And it may be no accident that moral

that would not be contained within his breast. (Ovid 2004, ll. 654–668, 208–209)
authority, in Coetzee’s tale as in Ovid’s, accrues to the character who doesn’t speak. While Lucy may lack a clear political motive, then, she could be said to have an ideological one: a commitment to what we might call non-catharsis, to forestalling the sort of symbolic lustrations that institutions within the world of the novel seem designed to bring about.

By the end of the novel, even David seems to have come around to this view. Reflecting on his work in Bev Shaw’s animal clinic, he decides that he does it “for his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (Coetzee 1999, 146). It is a useful image to keep in mind when considering Lucy’s actions in the novel. For Lucy—a white lesbian homesteader and soon-to-be single mother—is herself something of an ‘inconvenient’ body; unlike her father, she has made a life of the “awkward passages” he has endeavored to avoid (12). While he may try to standardize her situation, she will inevitably insist on its eccentricities: “Stop calling it the farm, David. This is not a farm, it’s just a piece of land where I grow things” (200). It is in this light that one might finally understand the reasons for Lucy’s silence. Far better to withhold her story than to subject it to a conventional ‘beating’: to the sort of homogenizing pressure that Coetzee, like Wharton and Hawthorne, suggests it is in the power of narrative and social discourse to exert.

IV. Conclusions

If Western literature has born extensive witness to forcibly silenced female characters, the evidence of these texts reminds us that women in fiction have also faced an inverse dilemma: the pressure to speak against their wills. And a comparative analysis of Hawthorne, Wharton, and Coetzee’s novels draws attention to this somewhat submerged counter-tradition, a class of literary heroines tasked with what we might call compulsory talking. That fictional heroines have faced this sort of expositional mandate gains support not only from these three texts, but from a broader survey of nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative. When, in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, Adam Verver presses his daughter for details of Charlotte Stant’s sentimental history (“‘Then don’t young women tell?’”), Maggie demurs, “‘Because, you mean, it’s just what they’re supposed to do?’” (2009, 160, 161). Maggie’s rejoinder (“‘Do young men tell?’”) hints at the lop-sided division of expressive labor not only in James’s novel, but perhaps in the novel more generally (2009, 161). While men enjoy the “[f]reedom to remain silent,” as David puts it, women have often been presented with no choice but to talk (1999, 188).

The question is why this burden of explanation should have fallen so frequently and disproportionately upon women. And the answer, to judge by
these texts, is because often this is where the burden of guilt has fallen, too. In each of these novels, the pressure on female protagonists to explain is symptomatic of a more deep-seated assumption that they should have to: that they have done something that needs explaining. Yet if all three heroines face this presumption of guilt to some degree, what distinguishes them is their shared capacity to resist the narrative of their own culpability. Through their withholding, Hester, Lily, and Lucy succeed in refuting the plots of female crime and punishment into which they would otherwise have been coerced. In the process, they point the way toward what might be called a politics of non-explanation—and hence, toward the recovery of silence as at least a possible extension, rather than contravention, of feminist discourse.

Of course, one should be careful not to overstate the potential of this withholding strategy; indeed, all three texts frame silence as a stopgap solution, and Wharton’s, in particular, seems to gesture toward the possibility of some expressive alternative. Yet the very identification of it as a strategy may allow for new understandings of what might otherwise read as mere instances of defeat. If The Scarlet Letter and The House of Mirth serve to model this sort of strategic withholding, it is Disgrace, ultimately, that may do the most to disallow the fiction of female culpability that motivates it. For unlike Hawthorne or Wharton, Coetzee denies access to his heroine’s intentions not only to the novel’s other characters, but to its readers, as well. And by refusing us knowledge of Lucy’s motives, the text refuses us the chance to judge them—and by extension, her. Readers cannot know what will happen to Lucy, or why she elects to act the way she does; to return to Alison Booth’s terms, one could say that, in contrast to Lily, both her “discourse” and her “story” remain open. And this indeterminacy is important. Whether one dismisses the lacunae in Lucy’s account as byproducts of the novel’s narrative construction or tokens of authorial discretion, it is hard to deny that given the expositional demands historically placed on fictional heroines, Coetzee’s silence, like Lucy’s, is deafening.

NOTES

1 Person, for one, has argued that Hester’s silence is powerful and “has the effect of action” (1989, 470). Yet by insisting this “action” is singularly “vengeful”—aimed at destroying Dimmesdale—he strangely limits the possibilities engendered by his own reading (470).

2 See Johnson’s essay “Muteness Envy” (1998), which argues that although an individual may mount such resistance, it is likely to be overridden by more powerful social frameworks.

3 Representative of this position are Tillie Olsen’s Silences (1978) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), two canonical studies which survey the consequences of silencing women, whether as fictional subjects.
(Gilbert and Gubar) or historical ones (Olsen). See also Listening to Silences (1994), an anthology of more recent responses to Olsen’s work (especially Carla Kaplan’s “Reading Feminist Readings: Recuperative Reading and the Silent Heroine of Feminist Criticism,” 168-194), and Patricia Yaeger’s “Afterword” in Feminism, Bakhtin, and The Dialogic (1991).

4 Dalton and Fatzinger (2003) cogently summarize the enduring power of this binary: “For late twentieth-century writers, scholars, and activists, voice achieved through breaking silence has been a prevailing empowerment metaphor for women” (34).

5 In S/Z, Barthes defines the “proairetic” as one of two “sequential” or irreversible codes, the one that regulates the “coordination of actions” in classical texts (1974, 30).

6 It is a measure of how fully Pearl has become synonymous with the inscrutable that a recent novel by Mary Gordon takes her name as its title. Like The Scarlet Letter, the plot of Pearl (2005) revolves around a young girl whose actions are impenetrable to all, but particularly to her mother.

7 Comparing Lily to Kate Chopin’s Edna Pontellier, Hochman goes so far as to blame the death of both heroines on narrative incompetence, arguing that they are “defeated in ‘life’ by their lack of several elements indispensable to fiction writing: not just a sense of plot, of how to structure and articulate one’s story, but a sense of the relationship between fiction and reality, artists and audience, teller and tale” (2004, 276).

8 It is an image that recalls Emma’s fantasy of how she would, retroactively, recall her departure with Rodolphe: “Behind four galloping horses, she had been carried seven days into a new land, whence they would never return” (2003, 182).

9 The phrase comes from Higgins and Silver’s anthology Rape and Representation (1991), which includes several essays on the use of elision in literary depictions of rape.

10 “Counterfocalization” is the term Spivak uses to designate the act of generating an “alternative narrative” while reading, often in response to some “provocation” in the text (2002, 22).

11 I am indebted to Graham (2003) for the reference to Ovid. However, while she alludes to the myth in order to illuminate the parallels between Melanie and Philomela, she makes no mention of the analogy between David’s actions and Tereus’s.

12 King Pandion, “embracing Tereus,/ commits his daughter to the Thracian’s care,” just as Mr. Isaacs committed his to David: “We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you” (Ovid 2004, ll. 713-4, 210; Coetzee 1999, 38).

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