The peculiar magic of Alice Munro’s stories may be found in the way they see through themselves, the characters, and, by implication, us. By the painstaking brushwork of accurate representations, within a context of other narrative and self-reflexive literary techniques, the human condition is exposed, plummeted, and then returned to itself. The concrete and the psychological are not separate, for together they create a captivating mimesis, a mirror whose very distortions make it representative of a reality which is inherently unstable and unknowable, because much goes unsaid and unwritten. Salient information and the most important meanings are almost always only suggested in Munro’s work; indeed, at times they are withheld. As in life, the great bulk of human motivation and influence is wordless. In the study of literature, we tend to view language as the repository of meaning or as signs which point to possible meaning. In Munro, silence holds more significance than sound, for silence is not simply space between articulated meanings. Silence is where all possible meaning resides while language’s possibilities proliferate in the quiet’s openness. Munro, the champion of reticence and discretion, mines the silence for words and then turns those words ironically back toward the silence to create the spaciousness and semantic expansiveness for which she is justly celebrated.

In a written text, language functions silently. In Munro there are three degrees of silence: first, the silence of narrative language — of prose fiction, written and read in quiet. This level of quiet appears analogous to the silence of the texts within Munro’s stories, those letters, diaries, notes, and signs written or read by her characters. The spoken words of the characters constitute the loudest of the silences, but paradoxically they remain part of the silent discourse of writing and reading, because, if we hear them at all, it is always an imaginary hearing. Then, as Catherine Sheldrick Ross has stressed, there are the narrative and thematic silences in the unfolding of the story, the plethora of times characters keep their thoughts to themselves, their words not said, their thoughts unexpressed, their letters undelivered or unanswered (795). Silent reading encompasses dialogue, text within text,
and those intentional silences which serve as decisive and determining narrative forces in Munro.

In the title story of Alice Munro’s *The Progress of Love* (1986), Fame, a divorced real estate agent, recalls a scene from her childhood in which her mother burns three thousand dollars in the kitchen wood stove, while Fame’s father, whether implicitly encouraging or benignly acquiescent, says nothing: “My father stood and watched and he never protested” (35). Although his silent watching is fictive, a product of Fame’s imaginative reconstruction and interpretation of the past, she views her father’s silence as love: “I consider that love” (35). Yet the silence, an imagined but powerful memory, becomes instead a symbol for “the progress of love,” the quiet husband allowing the wife to do something seemingly crazy, something their poverty should render unthinkable. For the reader, silence emerges as the creative space in which the parallel universe of genuine meaning — a husband’s deep but unspoken love for his wife — cuts through and beyond fact to reach toward something like truth. Emotional truth, as understood by Fame, is constellated as an imaginary silence. But in this story silence is not synonymous with love, because quiet also possesses sinister connotations: Fame’s mother, Marietta, “was always scared of that — a silent house,” and, on the morning of Marietta’s mother’s attempted suicide, Marietta “didn’t hear anything” (12). This other silence, a trope for fear, produces an equally powerful subjective truth which tends to override fact. In both examples from “The Progress of Love,” silence acts as a reservoir for the possible — in particular, meanings resonant with love, fear, despair, or other incommunicably profound emotion. As a writer, Alice Munro revels in such silences, building narratives around and out of them, superbly manipulating quiet effects. Munro’s preoccupation with the implications of silence, with what Ross calls the “taboo of silence” (795), is her most telling literary impulse.

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Munro manages each of the levels of silence brillianty to expand interpretive possibilities, yet silence extends beyond these three levels. Indeed one of Munro’s most impressive qualities as a writer is her command of the silences between, behind, before, after,
and around the words in a rhythm and a structure which produce a unique epistemology. The end of a Munro story lands the reader in a place of notable wordlessness, and we hover there, acutely conscious of the inability of language to fill it, a place where, as P.B. Shelley says in “On Life,” “words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know” (196). In the story “Silence,” from Runaway (2004), silence is presented both as the precondition of love and as the evidence of its opposite, but always silence is the imaginative core of fiction and fiction-making. The story details the relationship of a bereaved mother and Classics teacher, Juliet, and her initially close but later completely estranged daughter, Penelope. The naming of the two characters is ironically inverted, for one might expect Penelope to be the faithful, waiting, and abandoned woman (as in Homer) and Juliet to be the rebellious daughter who breaks her mother’s heart by running away into a permanent silence (as in Shakespeare). The irony serves to heighten the pathos of a painful emotional rift. Juliet’s telling “Everything” to her daughter, Penelope, may be responsible for Penelope’s later complete estrangement from her mother: “I shouldn’t burden you with all this,” Juliet says to her young daughter, and then, after years of continuing silence, Juliet asks her best friend, Christa, “Did I put too much on her?” (148). Silence, Juliet imagines, would have been a better kind of love: “She had been lacking in motherly inhibitions and propriety and self-control” (156).

As in “The Progress of Love,” or in the complicity of silence between father and daughter in “Walker Brothers Cowboy” and “Images,” both from Dance of the Happy Shades (1968), love might have been best expressed, at least symbolically, by wordlessness: “dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word” (43), the narrator concludes in “Images.” In “Silence,” however, Penelope’s long-term silence may be read as neglect, apathy, outright dislike, or hatred: “Penelope does not have a use for me. // Maybe she can’t stand me. It’s possible” (158). The word “possible” evokes the self-reflexive Munro who mines silence for the possible and explores quiet for imaginative creation, the bare meaning lying underneath the surface of language. Silence can be arbitrary or even cruel, as it is when a gentleman who works at Penelope’s spiritual retreat refuses to answer Juliet’s request to see Penelope: “He did not speak — perhaps there was a rule of silence” (129). Or when the retreat leader’s reply to the mother’s desperate entreaty “Where is she? Where did she go?” is “I
cannot tell you that” (130). Although such silences may be well intentioned, they seem loaded with malice in the context of this mother’s yearning. Moreover, all the silences in “Silence” are the still soil out of which narrative grows: they represent the “possible” — the nexus of the story. From her daughter’s silence, multiple hypothetical possibilities emerge in this mother’s imagination: the daughter as transcendentalist and mystic or as fishing off the British Columbia coast. The reader may add to these. In response to Penelope’s silence, Juliet’s becomes extreme. She lives a reclusive life among books and does not mention the rift to anyone, not even her lover. Christa had known, and therefore “It was possible that Christa had told him, and he had remained silent out of a consideration that it was none of his business. Or that Christa had told him, and he had forgotten. Or that Christa had never mentioned anything about Penelope, not even her name” (157). Not only does Juliet never discover which of her imagined scenarios, if any, is true, but the reader does not find out either.

Described plausibly as “undramatic” (142) by Brad Hooper — though this word falls far short of conveying the intense and riveting nature of the story — “Silence” gives snippets of multiple fictional stories whirling around it, while the actual narrative is fairly sparse. The relative paucity of plot, with silences both precipitating and propelling it, offers a rich context for the in-depth psychological exploration of character for which Munro is rightly praised. Like Proust’s writing or Joyce’s, Munro’s art leads us to this juncture that we might call introspection or contemplation. The silence following closure may be a lacuna or erasure. Although related to both the unconscious or the uncanny (even while it plays with those), the foregrounded silence is perhaps not human at all, but rather the absence of the human, a reality into which people prop themselves with shaky egos and frail bodies. Language is one of the frail bodies unable to fill or encompass anything like what surrounds and underpins it. Whatever words we use, the formlessness of quiet in no way diminishes its reality. If language points toward what we think we know, could know, or would like to know, then quiet expands all around it, insisting on what we do not and cannot know: what T.S. Eliot in The Waste Land describes as “Looking into the heart of light, the silence” (52, I.41). By ushering us into this place of unknowing, into the absence of words (see Heble 5-7), into the story’s quiet spaciousness, Munro expresses
profound scepticism about human knowledge and thereby produces an eerie, gothic sense in the most ordinary and realistic of situations. In accord with Pascal, we may feel that “Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie” (615).

Much can be made of the concrete objects which populate Munro’s stories along with her characters: the cups and the cupboards, the floors and the furniture, the corpses, the babies, the hair, and the clothing. Ditches, roots, rivers, motels, food. Close observation of the material world and its concrete objects, especially in visual terms, demands silence, because full absorption of the visual impact of objects is impossible during speaking or listening. The red box of Mr. Willens, the drowned optometrist in “The Love of a Good Woman,” is an example of an object over-determined as a site of seeing, as an instrument for examining vision and human perception. Yet this box that Ross calls “a smug, indestructible, empirical presence” (789) is obdurately silent about the human stories with which it is linked. The human and the concrete worlds are not distinct — they work in tandem. However, the world of objects, like Mr. Willens’ box, is a stark reminder of the limits of human subjectivity where descriptions and subterfuges are encoded in language. Objectivity, like death, lies ominously outside language as inexorable truth.

In many instances in Munro’s writing, visual perception of this objective reality is implacable and grotesque. Decaying bodies, hungering bodies, and lustful bodies create disorder or disruption which a civilization attempts to structure. In Munro such attempts to control chaos and decay manifest as hospitals, restaurants, bedrooms, phrases, responses, clothing, accessories, and, especially, stories (see Diemert 120). Reality lurks behind these codes, these finely and carefully polished surfaces, while an irrationality and a complexity defy their smoothness — their vanity, control, and expectation. There is the pathos of the aging body, as for example in “The Love of a Good Woman,” in which the dying Mrs. Quinn embodies the grotesque: “a little bird-boned woman, queerly shaped now, with her swollen abdomen and limbs and her breasts shrunk to tiny pouches with dried-currant nipples” (35). In Munro, sometimes the grotesque is innocently silent, and its silence is part of the grotesqueness, for the grotesque has no consciousness of its coarseness, and it is closely allied with that final silencing of human discourse — death.
Although Alice Munro assigns a wide range of occupations to her main characters, they are often writers, journalists, teachers, or actors. Their working lives are creative and verbal; however, these protagonists are almost always introverts engaged in collaborative and conspiratorial silences frequently associated with transgressions concerning sex or death or both. Munro implies an ironic scepticism about verbal outpourings: garrulous characters are ridiculous or slightly despicable, while the reticent are thoughtful and admirable. At best, talking signals a kind of helplessness or powerlessness. Notably, there is unelaborated yelling and noise-making in scenes from the marriages of many of Munro's characters, scenes like the time when Rose "smashed a gravy boat through a dining-room window" (95) in "The Beggar Maid" from *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978) and Doree's "weeping and howling and even banging her head on the floor" (13) in "Dimensions" from *Too Much Happiness* (2009). Such recurrent episodes are among Munro's most condensedly worded vignettes, as though the less said about them the better. At its worst, as shown in "The Love of a Good Woman," talking takes the form of Mrs. Quinn's "wicked outpouring talk" (64) or "Terrible talk" (67), in this case, about murder. Significant love — Enid's for Rupert in that same story, for instance — is often unspoken, and significant hatred, such as Mrs. Quinn's, sometimes finds an outlet in language. However, hatred also occasionally shrouds itself in silence, as in the story "Silence," and love occasionally speaks, although usually to its detriment.

As a corollary then to Munro's emphasis on silence, "noise" occurs at moments of betrayal and loss of control, such as when Greta, the newly published poet, young mother, and adulterous wife in "To Reach Japan," the first story in *Dear Life* (2012), finds her small daughter, Katy, stuck between the cars of the moving train, "sitting in that noisy space, helpless between the cars" (26). Additionally, in "Chance," from *Runaway*, Juliet's snub of a man's attempts at conversation on a noisy train immediately precedes that man's suicide on the tracks. The man's final noise when the train hits him — "a sort of awful thump" which Juliet tries but fails to write about in a letter, because "as soon as she had written the words *Awful Thump*, she had found herself unable to go on. Unable, in her customary language, to go on" (65) — represents a final silencing which is itself a reply to Juliet's earlier rude refusal to converse. In "Chance," silence replies to silence amid chaotic noise.
“this space was full of sudden noise, the clanking of heavy wheels on the rails” (63). In “To Reach Japan,” the closing image of Katy in the same clanking train noise reiterates a symbol of noise as life-threatening from a fictional anecdote planted earlier in the story about escapes during wartime: Greta “explained how in the stories the baby would start to cry and invariably had to be smothered or strangled so that the noise did not endanger the whole illegal party” (4). There is an ironic distance between these “stories” and the reality — “Peter said he had never heard such a story” (4). But in these legends, a child’s safety is endangered by the mother because noise represents danger and chaos. Katy’s experience is part of the same helpless predicament, caused by her mother’s betrayal and enacted in the story’s remaining destabilized narrative. Moreover, the negligent mother’s love-making on the train is a noise to be repressed: “biting each other to hold in some ferocious noise” (23). In “To Reach Japan,” these three references to the word “noise” join thoughts of adults murdering their babies as they escape totalitarian regimes, adulterous sexual activity, and the risking of a daughter’s safety. In “Amundsen,” the next story in Dear Life, Vivien likewise is abandoned to a noisy train by a person she has trusted, her then ex-fiancé. In the silence which we are left to contemplate at these stories’ ends, a controlled watchfulness replaces the cacophonous disturbances, as silence conveys the meanings which resist the relative meaninglessness and chaos of noise.

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Munro’s longest story, the novella “The Love of a Good Woman,” is one of her most elaborate and intriguing explorations of narrative art. It offers what Isla Duncan describes as “an exhilarating but also demanding experience, where the reader is on constant alert for diversions and ambushes” (91). In a narrative built around and out of gaps and silences, Munro radically questions the nature of storytelling and reality. The result is a contrapuntal movement of language, vision, and silence. “Jutland,” Part I of the novella, concentrates on three pre-adolescent boys, Cece Ferns, Bud Salter, and Jimmy Box, who operate in a system of silences, the unspoken condition of local boys’ culture. The boys do talk to one another, but the significant or most serious elements of their lives are unuttered.
Instead they speak of objects, such as a cow’s hipbone which they found along the river, of other things, turtle eggs for instance, which they might find, of a shack or boat they could build, and of money they could earn skinning muskrats (9). As is typical of talkers and talking in Munro’s stories, a lot of what they discuss is pure fiction, although they pretend to themselves that it is real. Munro signals the disconnection between words and reality in their posturing; on the topics of their home lives, their real lives, their feelings, their names even, and the corpse of Mr. Willens, they are silent. All substantial elements in the boys’ lives — all the matters probed and explored by the novella — remain unspoken. On their way back from their discovery of Mr. Willens’ drowned body, “the noises they’d made on their way out, the hoots and howls, were put aside as well” (11). Although they have a sense that “They would come into town yelling and waving their news around them” (11-12), a noisy newsmaking is not what transpires. Instead, when adults ask them the usual questions, “Even on this day, such voices speaking to them caused some alarm and confusion, and they replied with the usual reticence” (13). Moreover, the decision to say nothing at home about finding Mr. Willens’ drowned body is unspoken: “it wasn’t clearly said that they wouldn’t be telling anything at home. There wasn’t any good reason why Bud Salter or Jimmy Box couldn’t have done that. // Cece Ferns never told anything at home” (13-14).

Ildikó de Papp Carrington’s analysis of the boys’ delayed narration, explaining it as a function of the specific situations in their domestic lives, is apt. However, she implies that we should accept as valid the reasons put forward by what both she (162-63) and Brad Hooper (113-14) — disputably, I believe — term the story’s “omniscient narrator.” Judith McCombs employs a better epithet to describe the significant limitations on narrative authority here: “Munro’s Joycean omniscient-subjective narrator, who shows us only Enid’s thoughts” (131). Despite tentative interpretations, the narrator does not fully explain the reasons why such silence is understood and then maintained by all three boys at a time when one might expect them to be most inclined to speak. The narrator considers it a puzzle to be solved and explores multiple hypotheses to figure it out. There is that sense of solidarity among the boys in their discovery, that feeling of being separate and alienated from the world of adults. Cece can never tell things, because his father is violently abusive,
and Cece must always be on guard. Bud is more or less abused too by his older sisters, and his mother’s way of coping seems to consist of commanding quiet: “Stop swearing. Stop tattle-telling. Grow up” (19). Jimmy Box lives in a preternaturally polite but overcrowded family where no one says anything disagreeable. When the narrator remarks, “Did this explain why Jimmy kept his mouth shut that Saturday at dinnertime? They all kept their mouths shut, all three of them” (21), we know that such an explanation can cover at most only part of what is implied by the silence. The narrator, like Juliet writing of the “awful thump,” has no confidence in verbalizing what silence implies. One possible explanation suggested by the narrator is that “It was just that their houses seemed too full” (21). The narrator’s competing interpretive theories, however, tend to weaken each other, and it is a mistake to call a narrator who is clearly seeking an explanation “omniscient,” especially in what Carrington herself terms a “metafictional, many-voiced narrative about narration” (160).

The boys’ silence is the persistent thematic element of almost half the novella:

“Did you tell?”
“Did you?”
“Me neither.” (22)

This reticence is drawn out, emphasized, and repeated for no obvious or particular purpose that we might find in a more conventional writer. But it prefigures Enid’s analogous decision to keep silent about the same event, and it highlights the mystery, power, and limitations of human knowing. Carrington notes that “this delayed telling and the reasons for it forge significant links between the story’s two major situations” (160). Like the boys, Enid too decides to force her extraordinary knowledge into language, but like them, she inadvertently remains circumspect and mute. As Ross astutely observes about Part I, “The whole point of the repetition with variation of the same event — the failure to tell the news — must be that some things are untellable and some messages cannot be delivered” (795). The boys reinforce their silence when they walk past Mrs. Willens, whose husband they alone know to be dead. They accept, without uttering a word, her offering of forsythia.
branches: “What they knew, what they had seen, seemed actually to be pushed back, to be defeated, by her not knowing it” (24). In this case, the gap between fact (the death of Mr. Willens) and human knowledge (Mrs. Willens’ ignorance) has the effect of destabilizing the actual fact or of appearing to render it moot. A layering of destabilizations occurs through a later analogous situation. Enid thinks that her mother’s rejection of Enid’s childhood memory of her father’s extra-marital sexual activity defeats not just the telling, but the event itself. Concrete reality can only impinge so far on human subjectivity, which operates according to often irrational dictates.

The children stop and buy licorice whips in colours symbolically suggestive of blood and death — red and black — and finally decide to tell an adult their secret knowledge. Death is momentarily and randomly invoked by Colonel Box who says “I’m not dead yet” (27) as the boys pass. Numerous minor and insignificant characters, similar to those in a George Eliot novel, litter the streets of Walley. In this context of public local colour, the boys blurt their story to the watchman, Captain Tervitt: “Mr. Willens is out in Jutland Pond” and “We seen the car” and “Drowned” (29). Captain Tervitt’s silencing gesture, his “shushing motions” (29) while he searches for his hearing aid, indicates he has not heard a word. The silence now is in his subjective consciousness, as though the boys have not spoken at all. This deaf character, who “hated his hearing aid” (29), has a kind of moral authority (“Cars would do what he said, and children, too” [28]) and an aura of trustworthiness (“At night he went around checking the doors of all the stores to see that they were locked and to make sure that there was nobody inside committing a burglary” [28]). He keeps counsel (“The insult to Captain Tervitt remained a secret” [31]), and he radiates “his usual benevolent composure” (31). He foreshadows Enid with her rowboat at the end of the story: “he was used to being solitary, surely, staring out over the bow of the lake boats” (29). Paradoxically, the boys’ communicative sounds are silent for him, as indeed the entire story is for us on its pages. The boys’ long-deferred words in what Ross terms “a tour de force of deferral” (795) fall into a gaping hole of subjectivity, and, as a result, their decision to tell the news wilts and fades. Cece, “the quietest of the three,” says to Tervitt, “Your fly’s undone” (29), and they all run away. Now a new silence settles on the trio, this one the result of satisfaction from their prank on Captain Tervitt: “Their elation
did not vanish right away. But it was not something that could be shared or spoken about” (29). The three boys go home, each engaging in a solitary and quiet activity (Jimmy looking at magazines, Bud reading comic books, and Cece working on a hideaway) until Bud finally tells his mother, whose communication of the news is then as swift as Bud’s own communication of it was delayed.

This silence surrounding Mr. Willens’ body prefigures later quiet deferrals of speech by Mrs. Quinn and Enid, whose own deferral of communication is the note on which the story ends: what John Gerlach describes as “the incomplete resolution of the quiet wait by the river” (148). In “Jutland,” the local story emerges, highlighting the boys’ secrecy: “Something was made of the boys’ sitting down and eating their dinners and never saying a word. And then buying a bunch of licorice whips. A new nickname — Deadman — was found and settled on each of them” (30). The boys’ silence is what causes the name “Deadman” to be conferred on all three of them, drawing silence, with uncanny and ominous symbolic overtones, toward (or out of) death. The nickname outlives the story and outlasts the facts by being passed along much later to Cece’s two sons at a point when the origins and reasons for the nickname are forgotten. The connections between words and events are tenuous; a literary reason for the silence is because of its greater ability to express the significance of death, a catastrophe which defies language and imposes quiet. So in addition to all the plausible reasons for repeated silence on a matter of great urgency, there is the metaphor of death as silence which imposes rigid but mysterious rules on the living and inhibits their communications. Mrs. Willens too is complicit in a silence analogous to the boys’. Her excuse to the police for not reporting her husband’s disappearance, “I didn’t want to bother you” (30), hardly seems sufficient, while the narrator’s own silence is suggestive: Mrs. Willens might well have been used to disappearances by her philandering husband; she might not have cared that he was away; she might even have known where he was or with whom. Maybe the so-called “omniscient” narrator does not know. The possibilities remain opaque because Mrs. Willens and Munro too do not articulate them.

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Part I of the novella, “Jutland,” is the thirty-page story of the three boys, their discovery of Mr. Willens’ body, Bud’s deferred reporting of the discovery, their extended silence on the subject of finding a corpse, and a confrontation with mortality. The boys then leave the novella entirely, and we enter into what looks like a new story, Part II, “Heart Failure.” This gap between the two narratives is a space of silence which produces semantic potentialities into which the story refuses to settle. The effect of this silent space in the text is therefore unsettling and eerie. After the pause, Part II begins with Enid, the unofficial nurse, writing in her notebook: “Glomerulonephritis” (31), a word which reproduces the grotesque through both its onomatopoeia and its clinical meaning about the specific way in which some kidneys fail. For several pages, no link is drawn between Mr. Willens’ dead body and Mrs. Quinn’s diseased one. Although Rupert is the alleged murderer of Mr. Willens, Mrs. Quinn, a witch-figure revelling in the disgusting and unspeakable, is much more horrifying. She both embodies (“the smell that came out on her breath and through her skin was acrid and ominous” [31]) and utters, through free indirect discourse, the grotesque (“Pushing and sucking and dribbling and digging into her and hurting her” [60]). Enid, in contrast, is the soul of discretion. When probed for information about the cause of Mrs. Quinn’s illness (Mrs. Green implies it is from taking abortion pills), Enid, “Not wanting to offend but seeing which way the questions were tending,” says, “It’s hard to tell” (32) — a phrase which is an artistic credo as well as a thematic summation of Munro’s fiction and a statement of the ambiguity facing the reader. In “The Love of a Good Woman,” the phrase applies to the boys, Enid, Rupert, Mrs. Quinn, the narrator, and the reader, all of whom find it “hard to tell.” By the end of the novella, the one thing we know is that telling and knowledge do not cohere, that the full story behind the narrative and whether a murder was committed are unknowable.

Rupert’s silence, like Cece’s, Bud’s, and Jimmy’s before, is noteworthy. When the girls teased and bullied him in grade school, he refrained from replying (“They did not really expect him to respond” [33]). Later when Enid brings his children toys, “Rupert didn’t ask where the playthings came from” (34). Rupert makes efforts to avoid talking to people, especially his dying wife, whose illness is mysteriously connected to the cover-up of the supposed murder which coincided with its inception, and when he does see her, it is for

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“never ... more than a few minutes” (35). According to Mrs. Quinn, Rupert’s stealthy quiet is causally connected to the narrated murder: “neither one of them heard Rupert come in” since “He sneaked back through the kitchen not making any noise” and therefore “got in the room without either of them hearing him” (57). Immediately after the ostensible murder, both husband and wife remain wordless for some time.

Munro leads into the climactic scene of the work, Mrs. Quinn’s narrative in Part III, “Mistake,” by finishing Part II, “Heart Failure,” with dialogue which renders the import of that episode indeterminate:

“I could tell you something you wouldn’t believe,” Mrs. Quinn said.
“People tell me lots of things,” said Enid.
“Sure. Lies,” Mrs. Quinn said. “I bet it’s all lies. You know Mr. Willens was right here in this room?” (56)

Later, after Enid hatches her plan to corner Rupert into either revealing the truth or killing her, Enid remembers these comments at a critical moment: “Lies’ is the word that Enid can hear now, out of all the words that Mrs. Quinn said in that room. Lies. I bet it’s all lies.” (74). In Sherwood Anderson’s story cycle *Winesburg, Ohio*, which Munro herself cites as a major influence (see Metcalf 86), an old man posits, in an unpublished tome, “The Book of the Grotesque,” that there is a connection among silence, the grotesque, and narration: “It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood” (6-7). Mrs. Quinn, through her diseased body, her hatred, and her fracturing of the silence becomes “a grotesque,” and “The Love of a Good Woman” itself participates in the corruption of truths through telling. Enid’s choice, and Munro’s narrative dilemma, is whether or not to let a truth degenerate into falsehood by dragging it out of the silence.

Mrs. Quinn’s horrifying tale of murder and cover-up is followed by a night of wakeful silence for Enid at the beginning of Part IV, the final section of the novella, “Lies.”
She is endeavouring, in this quiet introspective world, to determine what to do. She is trying to see:

Mist was rising so that you could hardly see the river. You had to fix your eyes, concentrate, and then a spot of water would show through, quiet as water in a pot. There must be a moving current, but she could not find it. (63)

The “moving current” is perhaps the story, and “but she could not find it” is a metaphor for “it’s hard to tell.” Here the quiet of the sought-for image is emphasized, and then Enid spies a rowboat which conveys a silent symbolic language different in purpose from Mrs. Quinn’s “wicked outpouring talk” (64). Enid “kept watching it, as if it could say something to her. And it did. It said something gentle and final. // You know. You know.” (64). The silent boat and the quiet lead to a sense of Enid’s knowing some unutterable truth. An analogous almost telepathic knowledge occurs in the story “Open Secrets,” when Maureen intuits Mr. Slater’s murder of Heather Bell, together with his wife’s, like Mrs. Quinn’s, complicity in and control of the cover-up. Maureen’s knowledge is shrouded in a silence more complete even than Enid’s in “The Love of a Good Woman,” and Munro herself does not verbalize the suspicion, but merely implies it through the repeated image of Mr. Slater’s hands pressing down on a tablecloth (152, 158), stroking the feathers on his wife’s hat (153, 158), and then later, in Maureen’s imagination, his one hand being “pressed down, unresistingly, but by somebody else’s will” (158) into the burner of a stove.

What is it that the rowboat tells Enid she knows? Is it that the murder happened? Or is it that she must take the boat out into the lake with Rupert in order to ask him if the murder happened? Or does it tell her something barred from the reader’s comprehension? On Mrs. Quinn’s last day on earth, Enid “never spoke to her and never touched her hand” (66). The reasons for this wordlessness and distancing are not clear, but Enid may be responding to Mrs. Quinn’s recent “wicked outpouring talk” (64) with a discretion more powerful than language, or possibly in a rejection of the horror which Mrs. Quinn embodies in both word and flesh. Paradoxically, perhaps, on the day she is almost certain that Mrs. Quinn will die, “Enid put no restriction on the noise” (65) made by the children.
Yet the death itself is marked by more silent horror: “The sheet was pulled out and Mrs. Quinn’s head was hanging over the side of the bed, a fact that Enid did not record or mention to anybody” (67). The final silencing of Mrs. Quinn is marked by Enid’s own silence — in another juxtaposition of the decision (like the boys’) not to speak beside death. Furthermore, the notes in Enid’s journal on the day of the death, though silent and private, are more remarkable for what they do not say than for what they do. For example, about the long story of murder and cover-up, she writes simply: “July 9. Vy. agitated. Terrible talk” (67). In response to her mother’s curiosity about her insomnia and her exhaustion, she hedges rather than speak the truth. Her time after leaving the Quinns’ house is solitary and quiet: “She did not go out of her mother’s house in the daytime, but she did go for walks at night, when she could be sure of not meeting anybody and having to talk” (71).

Enid plans to risk her own life in order to discover the truth or the untruth of Mrs. Quinn’s story of murder. Such a strategy is extreme, improbable even, but it represents an imaginative curiosity which drives us to uncover the truth of a story. Ultimately, this curiosity, whether Enid’s or ours, is largely thwarted. The facts, it turns out, are inaccessible, and we deal only in possibilities and probabilities. The writer’s silence on the crucial facts of her own fiction discloses scepticism about the potential of human curiosity and understanding. Mr. Willens’ ophthalmoscope with various lenses creating multiple versions of reality is an apt metaphor for Munro’s art. But the retinoscope is even more apt — the “dark sort of mirror” (4) of its flat face is the hazy mimesis Munro adheres to. We have only dim access to vision. We, like Enid, can peer as hard as we might, but only see, as Dennis Duffy emphasizes, as through a glass darkly (183-84): in the Pauline mirror, there is promise of eventual clear vision, whereas in Munro there is simply the avid attempt to see. Speaking with Geoff Hancock, Munro observed, “What I like is not to really know what the story is all about. And for me to keep trying to find out” (Munro qtd. in Heble 12). Enid then is a symbolic representation of both the reader’s and Munro’s own curiosity about the story, how it might unfold, its semantic reach.

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Who is the good woman in the story’s title? It would seem to be Enid, although whom she loves is an open and unanswered question. Everyone seems to think of Enid as a good woman, a kind of saint, but that characterization is undercut by her mother’s complaints, “But sometimes it’s a devil of a lot of work,” she said. ‘This being the mother of a saint’ (44), as well as by Enid’s dislike of her patient, Mrs. Quinn: “She could not conquer her dislike of this doomed, miserable young woman” (38). Subverting her goodness even further are Enid’s horrendous nightmares which, being darkly sexual, alter the “love” in the title as well. The focalized Enid-narrator here considers the irony of the word “good”:

For everybody, though, the same thing. Evil grabs us when we are sleeping; pain and disintegration lie in wait. Animal horrors, all worse than you can imagine beforehand. The comforts of bed and the cows' breath, the pattern of the stars at night — all that can get turned on its head in an instant. And here she was, here was Enid, working her life away pretending it wasn't so. Trying to ease people. Trying to be good. An angel of mercy, as her mother had said, with less and less irony as time went on. Patients and doctors, too, had said it. (52)

So Enid’s response to the chaos of the irrational and grotesque is to provide some silent order, through prayer, through discretion, through childcare and eldercare, and through housework: “washing the cloudy glasses” (52), reminiscent of the cloudy glass of the retinoscope at the story’s beginning and of the Pauline mirror. Are these tasks “the love” of the “good woman”? She cannot pray, however, about her nightmares, an abyss of silent meaninglessness in which her religious faith has no place. If Enid, through her curiosity, represents both reader and writer, then the phrase “a good woman,” with all its concomitant ironies, extends out to and encompasses both these metatextual roles as well. If the narrator is the “good woman,” towards the end of “The Love of a Good Woman” she adopts the silent position of Fame’s father in “The Progress of Love,” not really witnessing or telling about the crucial event, but symbolically granting us permission to view it as we wish by bestowing on us our interpretive autonomy.
In Enid’s fantasized plot about extracting a confession from Rupert, with which she hopes to uncover the truth of Mrs. Quinn’s story, we apprehend that Enid cares more about knowing than telling, and indeed more about knowing even than staying alive. Her drive to know, her curiosity, is such that she prepares herself to brave death rather than to live in doubt. Her plan to go out in a rowboat with Rupert, tell him she cannot swim, and then ask him if the story is true puts her in grave danger, “Even if she said at once — and meant it, she would mean it — that she was never going to tell” (72). Her intention is to speak “very quietly all the time” (72) and to convince Rupert himself to tell: “I’m not going to tell, but you are. You can’t live on with that kind of secret” (72), she imagines saying to him. Enid’s fantasy about this conversation (which, like the scene in Fame’s memory, never happens) is in part a projection of her own inability to “live on with that kind of secret.” She is on the verge of risking her own life to extract a confession and persuade the guilty to confess publicly. In a letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, in December 1817, John Keats wrote of “Negative Capability” as the capacity for “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (43). However much Enid may be mistakenly driven toward fact and reason, the story itself creates a Keatsian aesthetic of negative capability in its embrace of what, in a letter to Joshua Reynolds, dated 3 May 1818, Keats, echoing Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” called “the burden of the Mystery” (95). In Enid’s imagination, she plans to support Rupert through his ordeal in jail: “Every day, or as often as they will let her, she will sit and talk to him in jail, and she will write him letters as well” (73). Then she suggests that such fantasies are like love and verging on “indecent” (73). This is not the only time in Munro or even in this novella when talk is equated with indecency. For another example, see the narrator’s remark in “Family Furnishings,” from Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage (2001), about her mother’s and aunt’s voices being “like worms slithering around in my insides” (108).

Here too in Part IV, “Lies,” Enid remembers a scene when she was four or five, which she relayed to her mother, involving her father in an erotic encounter with another woman. Her mother said it was a dream, and Enid later recollects realizing it must have been a dream. But the problem with this “indecent” memory that Enid tells, and which
then both she and her mother allegedly disbelieve, is that it still remains credible. Behind their wishful thinking or disingenuousness we can read the probability that a very young child would not make up such a story. Yet Enid says, about her own story of her father, “Lies” (75). In this case, whom do we credit? The people involved or our own judgment? Even if Enid’s father did have a woman on his lap and her breast in his mouth, Enid’s childhood memory of it morphs the breast into an inverted ice cream cone. In Munro’s epistemology, the vivid imaginary way in which the mind colours actual and impossible memories renders their telling inherently deceptive regardless of the facts, forever inaccessible to human understanding because of the gap between subjective awareness and the otherness of the objective world.

Enid reminds herself of the indecency of both her own and Mrs. Quinn’s speaking, as she contemplates the fertile imaginative ground of silence:

She hadn’t asked him yet, she hadn’t spoken. Nothing yet committed her to asking. It was still before. Mr. Willens had still driven himself into Jutland Pond, on purpose or by accident. Everybody still believed that, and as far as Rupert was concerned Enid believed it, too. And as long as that was so, this room and this house and her life held a different possibility, an entirely different possibility from the one she had been living with (or glorying in — however you wanted to put it) for the last few days. The different possibility was coming closer to her, and all she needed to do was to keep quiet and let it come. Through her silence, her collaboration in a silence, what benefits could bloom. For others, and for herself. (75-76)

Enid’s epiphany is this realization of the necessity of silence: “This was how to keep the world habitable” (76). She now makes the decision not to ask, but they still proceed down to the river and the rowboat. This time Enid has put herself in Rupert’s shoes both literally (she is wearing his old boots from when he was a child) and figuratively (by not bringing him to justice). The final image is one of choice between sound (“If she tried to, she could still hear Rupert’s movements in the bushes” [78]) and silence (“But if she concentrated on the motion of the boat, a slight and secretive motion, she could feel as if everything
for a long way around had gone quiet” [78]). Katherine J. Mayberry writes of Munro that “Throughout her career, she has insisted on the existence of pre-linguistic experience, of a truth that originates outside of, independent of language” (37). “The Love of a Good Woman” offers an astonishingly explicit and dexterous allegory of this epistemology.

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We end in an eerie and numinous place of quiet unknowing where we pause to reflect in our own interpretive space that silence is necessary — a fulcrum for semantic potential. Do Rupert and Enid form a relationship, as is intimated? Does she change her mind again and fulfill her original plan? If so, how would Rupert respond? Or, as Gerlach wonders, “Will silence save Enid or destroy her?” (154). In “Silence,” why does the daughter, Penelope, leave the mother, Juliet, and us, with no answers? In “The Progress of Love,” are anyone’s memories accurate? Can we trust what characters say? In “Ode to a Nightingale,” Keats writes, “the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf” (281, lines 73–74). Munro reminds us that fiction, indeed all language, is deceptive: “Lies.” Human speech fabricates, exaggerates, misremembers, glosses over, and undermines the illusive objective world. Noise may represent the disintegration of safety, as it does in “To Reach Japan” for little Katy, stuck “on one of those continually noisy sheets of metal” (25), “sitting in that noisy space, helpless between the cars” (26) of the train. For this reason as well, Munro’s stories compel us to heed the silence.

The novella “The Love of a Good Woman,” like Enid herself, remains, in Keats’s words from “Ode on A Grecian Urn,” a “still unravish’d bride of quietness” (282, line 1). After the narrative contingencies opened by silence, in addition to multiple interpretations both inviting and resisting scrutiny, there is a further stretching into a space beyond the credible to a place of radical unknowing. George Steiner observes in “The Retreat from the Word” that “The highest, purest reach of the contemplative act is that which has learned to leave language behind it” (12). At the end of a Munro story, through contemplation, we have a feeling of coming close to but never quite arriving at the ineffable truth. As she writes in “The Office,” from Dance of the Happy Shades, “It doesn’t matter. However I put
it, the words create their space of silence, that delicate moment of exposure" (59). Munro leads us to this silence as to a secret, a treasure — a progress of narrative love — because the only certainty is death's eventual silencing of human chatter and a subsequent deafness to all sound.

**Works Cited and Consulted**


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