The Priority of Silence

Recovering an anterior sense of “active receptivity” to acquire right relationship with contemporary digital media environments.

by

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ABSTRACT

In a digital age where human interaction and knowledge is increasingly conditioned by the binary logic of our technological devices, concerns mount regarding the liabilities and losses the human person is incurring at the personal and social, cognitive and spiritual levels. The thesis of this study is that a right relationship with our electronic artifices is possible only through a recovery of a sense of human contingency and creaturehood, a sense that can be fostered through the priority of “active receptivity” to the givenness of being. This attitude can be acquired through an experience of the fullness of silence, a silence that is necessary for authentic communication to occur and that is modeled for us in phenomenological study and in sacred scripture. Experiences of silence can, in the end, lead us to the cultivation and maintenance of right relationships with our technologies, with others and with God.
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

– T.S. Eliot, Choruses from the Rock
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Introduction
Technology: Friend or Foe?

Understood in this case not as a capacity or aptitude for work, but rather as a whole set of instruments which man uses in his work, technology is undoubtedly man's ally. It facilitates his work, perfects, accelerates and augments it. It leads to an increase in the quantity of things produced by work, and in many cases improves their quality. However, it is also a fact that, in some instances, technology can cease to be man's ally and become almost his enemy, as when the mechanization of work “supplants” him, taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of its slave.

– John Paul II, Laborem Exercens

Human beings have always been technological. Ever since the earliest times when we learned to use sticks and rocks to assist in the daily tasks of survival, the creative combination and use of physical objects as tools has been part of human activity, even contributing in a constitutive manner to our human identity, since tool-making requires the application of reason. We are creatures of the artifice, makers in addition to doers, and this is part of what gives us dignity. As the media scholar Walter Ong pointed out, technology is like a musical instrument, and just as our humanity is enriched though becoming a musician, likewise we become more enriched with the expanded sense of mastery, accomplishment, skills and virtuosity that accompany our technological achievements. The creativity involved in inventing new technologies is fundamentally a human good.

The communications media are a subset of technology, and today are increasingly converging into a single digital entity we call the Internet. It includes a variety of devices that “plug us in” – smart phones, iPods, tablets and the like – permitting us entry into a virtual electronic world with greater frequency and duration, and ever-increasing absorption of our time.¹ That time is largely spent consuming digital music and video,

¹ In 2011, more than 800 million people were subscribed to the social network site Facebook, spending 700 billion minutes there each month. YouTube users were uploading sixty hours of video per minute, triggering more than one trillion playbacks in 2010 – roughly 140 video views
gaming, interacting with others and maintaining a digital persona through blogging and social networks. We have quickly become citizens of a digital world, the latest development in the long history of technological evolution. Ong and his one-time teacher Marshall McLuhan established the major stages of that history as evolving from a predominantly oral society to a literate one, first chirographical (writing), then that of the printing press. Today, in a comparably short period of time, we have become a predominantly electronic age, whose latest chapter is the digital evolution. In the last century, civilization has seen a quantum leap in technological development, but the advances in digital technology and the consequent changes in human behaviour in the last twenty years have been especially dramatic.

As the “virtual reality” of the digital world becomes increasingly the ground or environment in which the human person thinks, acts and communicates, there are certain fundamental questions which will form the basis of the present inquiry: What criteria are there to help humanity judge both the benefits and the costs of our new technologies? What are the concerns emerging from the increased hours spent in artificial computerized environments? Are we fostering a “disincarnate” consciousness that is ultimately harmful to human flourishing in the natural world? There is an urgent need today to form criteria of discernment to aid us with these questions, and while the Church has offered many such criteria, the Church also has a need for such a reflection.

The propositional argument of this thesis is that a right relationship to media technology is attainable in part through the recovery of the priority of silence, understood as both an experience and an inner attitude characterized by “active receptivity”. This attitude is not so much to the digital field itself, but to incarnate reality and the Trinitarian God, and results from a recovery of the priority of being over doing/making, an existential stance that acknowledges one’s ontological contingency and creaturehood. In arguing for the recovery of the priority of silence, I hope to provide at least the beginnings of some

answers to the previous questions and these: How might receptive silence result in wonder and gratitude, and how might this attitude remedy the troubling dichotomies that our virtual environments provoke? How might such an attitude affect what we consider to be the “real”, change the way we approach and use our tools, connect with others, and ultimately with God? Finally, what are some of the challenges, prophetic roles and opportunities facing the Church and the human person in the emerging digital age?

The problem itself can be narrowed to the following terms. Some philosophers and theologians argue that a fundamental disorder\(^2\) underlies modern technological society, a fragmentation of the original harmony of *knowing*, a rift between the natural and supernatural, faith and reason, being and doing, etc., traceable, in large part, to a Baconian and Cartesian dualism. These arguments have merit, and yet are sometimes paralyzed by the fact that technology has also brought a great many positive benefits, and cannot simply be undone so that we might live in a more “natural” paradigm of consciousness and sociality. Neil Postman exemplifies this more “hostile” attitude to technology, when he writes: “A technological resistance fighter maintains an epistemological and psychic distance from any technology, so that it always appears somewhat strange, never inevitable, never natural.”\(^3\) According to philosophers like these, we are basically slaves to the dominion of our artifices, so long as the modern “Cartesian” mindset and system of technology remains in place, and influences in a totalitarian and depersonalizing way our thought, politics, education, as well as (as we will examine) the terms and horizons of our consciousness and our capacity to love.

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\(^2\) British theologian John Milbank, for example, applies this criticism to theology, rejecting the use of social theory as coming from a secular ethos that is founded on the fundamental “violence” of these cleavages. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul is also a prominent critic of the technological hegemony of culture (See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1965, and *The Technological Bluff*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990).

\(^3\) Neil Postman, *Technopoly* (New York: Random House, 1993), 185. Postman defines “Technopoly” as a society which believes “the primary, if not the only, goal of human labour and thought is efficiency, that technical calculation is in all respects superior to human judgment…” Postman draws heavily from McLuhan, who himself became concerned that the emerging “electronic consciousness” might be a dangerous “facsimile of the body of Christ” (See Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*. Edited by Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szklarek, Toronto: Stoddart, 1999).
Others maintain that media/technology is essentially neutral, albeit in a generally progressive trajectory: we control our tools, not vice versa, and the human person is quite capable of making reasonable judgments about the proper role or influence of media/technology. One such thinker is the philosopher N. Katherine Hayles, who writes:

In my view, machines are “real things,” so I don't see an engagement with machines as in any way antithetical to contemporary reality … not as a dichotomy between the real and virtual but rather as space in which the natural and the artificial are increasingly entwined. I foresee a proliferation of what Bruno Latour calls “quasi-objects,” hybrid objects produced by a collaboration between nature and culture—genetically engineered plants and animals, humans who have had gene therapy, humans with cybernetic implants and explants, intelligent agent systems with evolutionary programs who have evolved to the point where they can converse in a convincing fashion with humans, and so forth. Our challenge now, it seems to me, is to think carefully about how these technologies can be used to enhance human well-being and the fullness and richness of human-being-in-the-world…

While Hayles looks speculatively at cybernetics and “hybrids”, her central position applies equally to digital media, in which the human and the machine are increasingly “one”. She is representative of a position that believes there is certain determinism to more-or-less continuous technological development, and that the outcomes for humanity will be generally positive if we are aware of the practical nature of our human needs. While Hayles must be commended for her faith in human nature, there is a weakness, I believe, in her ultimate concession to inevitability, and the lack of any explicit anthropology with a properly constitutive teleology that might provide criteria for discerning limitations we might place upon technology. Her position also seems to underestimate the cognitive and spiritual implications of living in greater virtual reality – if by this we mean the artificial environments experienced through the sensory stimuli provided by the computer, and the states of consciousness they induce over prolonged use.

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5 “Well-being”, “fullness” and “richness” in our human life, one notes, are largely relative terms, and lack philosophical precision concerning the ends of human existence.
Another thinker of the optimistic school is the French paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), who saw cybernetics as the latest stage in the evolutionary development of the cosmos. Although he didn’t live to see the Internet, Teilhard believed that humanity was evolving towards an ultimate state of unity with itself and the universe, in what he termed the “Omega Point”. When human minds intersect in this process, there emerges what he terms the noosphere, a unified sphere of human thought and consciousness. “The noosphere,” he wrote,

which is the final and supreme product in man of the forces of social ties, can take on full and final significance when we look on the noosphere, taken in its global totality, as constituting one vast corpuscle in which, after more than 600 millions years, the biospheric effort towards cerebralisation attains its objective.\textsuperscript{6}

Teilhard believed that the Omega Point was the goal of all history, and that our machines were helping us reach it. Our “collective cerebralisation” was being brought about by “those astonishing electronic machines (the starting-point and hope of the young science of cybernetics)”\textsuperscript{7} to reinforce and multiply our mental abilities. This completion of our cerebral development would improve its functioning exponentially, by somehow activating or connecting dormant neurons, or “by direct (mechanical, chemical or biological) stimulation of new arrangements.”\textsuperscript{8} While Teilhard’s theories are varying seen as prophetic, poetic, obtuse or wildly speculative, there is no doubt that he viewed technology as becoming increasingly integrated with the human biosphere, and hoped that it would bring about a greater unity among peoples.

Whether or not Teilhard’s theory of cosmic evolution and the key role that science and technology plays in it will prove correct, scholars on all sides acknowledge that technology, especially digital technology and media, creates influential environments, and agree we need to reflect critically upon them. Some, as we have noted, remain pessimistic while others are optimistic about the means and prospects of future coexistence of humanity with technology. In this work, I propose to make a via media argument, in which I will attempt to maintain the philosophical critiques of the first

\textsuperscript{6} Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, \textit{Man’s Place in Nature} (London: Collins, 1966), 81.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
school of argument, enhancing their concerns by the addition of recent neurological and sociological data on the cognitive effects of the Internet; at the same time, I desire to embrace the second school’s optimism that coexistence and harmonious integration of digital technology is possible by developing a teleological anthropology that might help us form criteria of discernment. To this end I will establish the necessity of silence as an ordering experience for a right relationship with other beings and objects, above all with our machines.

The parameters of this study will require certain focused texts in the face of the substantial volume of primary and secondary literature that exists on the thought of my key interlocutors. To outline the problem I will focus on the thought of Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, and George Grant; Ellul, above all, articulates a theory of the modern technique-based mechanical society, and is quoted as an authority by both Marshall McLuhan and George Grant, as well as almost every theorist who grapples with the questions of a technology-defined society. In the face of the rapid developments in the field of digital technology, I will also examine the specific claims made by Nicolas Carr in *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*. The Internet is more than just a member of the “communications media”, but is a pole in which all the electronic and digital media are converging, and as such, is an environment that is highly formative of human consciousness – thus extending our philosophers’ concerns into the digital realm. Concerns elicited will center on the superficial and fleeting forms of thinking that results from this environment, the diminishing capacity for contemplation, and ultimately the handicapping of the acquisition of wisdom.

As a proposed solution to this problem, I posit as my hermeneutic the notion of silence as “active receptivity”, a counter-balance to the “noise” and hyperactivity of the human sensorium and to the “passive receptivity” with which we tend to consume much electronic media. To introduce the notion of silence, I will rely on the largely philosophical reflections *The World of Silence* (1952) by Max Picard and *Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization* (2012) by Benedict XVI, and enrich it with the spiritual theology of Catherine de Hueck Doherty, especially her books *Poustina* (1975) and

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9 McLuhan’s term for the range of human senses that receive information as sense-data.
Molchanie (2001), in which the dynamics of interior silence are articulated. I will also look at the role of silence and desert experience in the life of Christ, and expand on this Christological precedent with several insights from Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Essentially, I will argue that both silence’s cause and effect will be the reestablishing of a sense of the priority of “being” over “making/doing” – an ontological question, as well as the human teleology of love. We are made to love one another, because we were made in love (having been given an existence which shares gratuitously in God’s being). Michael Hanby argues that if creation is gratuitously “given”, then consequently every human action is preceded ontologically if not temporally by an act of contemplative receptivity. This should profoundly affect how we discern our use of all created things. In short, silence should restore to us our intrinsic ability to see and receive everything as gift, a sensibility the digital environments render difficult, but which contemplation restores.

The question concerning a right relationship with technology has no greater contemporary thinker than Albert Borgmann, whose insights about what is “reality” and the key idea of “focal practices” – the human activities that make life meaningful – provide a way of looking ethically at technology and daily life. I propose to demonstrate how silence, and the contemplative disposition we have elucidated, positively facilitates our discernment of focal practices and a well-ordered use of technology (all in the light of the human telos of love). This study will conclude with questions and suggestions for the Church concerning its use of media and technology in the enacting of its kerygmatic vocation, drawing from Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan, above all the latter’s posthumous anthology The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion (1999). Both philosophers provide much untapped insight into the nature of the Word and its proclamation in various forms of media, both historically and speculatively. Thus we will end with the question of how the Church might best exercise that mission today.
Chapter 1
Modern Technology: Origins and Liabilities

It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.
– Albert Einstein

1 Problemata from Philosophy

In Plato’s Phaedrus, Socrates recounts the story of Thamus, the king of Egypt, to whom appeared Theuth, a “man full of arts”, who offered the king and his people the gift of writing. The king refused, fearing that when people come to depend on the written word as a substitute for the knowledge they knew by memory, they would “cease to exercise memory… calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.” Since writing would be “telling them of so many things without teaching them,” the people would seem “to know much, while for the most part they know nothing” and would be filled, “not with wisdom, but with the conceit of wisdom.” In a sense, Thamus was right, for the new technology did have some of the effects he feared, but he also didn’t foresee its many benefits: the ways in which reading and writing would expand ideas, assist communication, build civilization and even contribute to the acquisition of wisdom. It’s important, therefore, that we don’t fear technology for the changes it might bring. But just as we celebrate its many benefits, it is equally important to be observant of the losses, and to pay attention to overall effects.

1.1 Heidegger and Modern Technology

Concerns over digital media environments and their effects on human consciousness have a venerable pedigree in 20th century philosophy. Martin Heidegger, who has become, in

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11 Ibid.
12 In their book Philosophy and Technology – Readings in the Philosophical Problems of Technology (New York: The Free Press, 1972), editors Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey described three general approaches to the problem of defining modern technology: the epistemological, which seeks to understand the basic epistemic nature of technical knowledge;
a sense, father of a school of thought on the problem, wrote in his seminal essay “The Question Concerning Technology”\textsuperscript{13} that modern technology as a whole has fundamentally changed our relationship with nature. It starts with the question of what is truth and what is our knowledge of truth. Heidegger’s employment of the Greek notion of \textit{aletheia} (unveiling or revealing) implied that the world was a wonderful place that revealed its essences in a multitude of ways. The human subject receives knowledge of the world, and is thereby enriched, particularly when objects are permitted to reveal their essential meaning in a plurality of ways. Modern technology poses a problem because it tends to cause us to view the world as a pure resource to be consumed. The difference, he claims, between a windmill and a hydroelectric power plant – the difference between technology and modern technology – is that in the former there was greater harmonious relationship with nature, while in the latter, nature is seen as an object to be exploited. Modern technology tends to redefine the identity of the natural object, and cause other principles, such as gaining “the maximum yield at minimum expense”, to predominate. Furthermore, modern technology requires us to view the whole world as a “calculable coherence of forces”, to the exclusion of other forms of revealing. He calls this mentality “enframing”, that which calls out, impels, and challenges forth the revealing of the actual, implying that there is a certain “violence” involved in the relationship.

Heidegger does not see danger in technological invention per se, only if and when they prevent us from experiencing other forms of revealing. While it is true that all objects in the world have an aspect of being resources and of being “a calculable coherence of forces,” there are also poetic, religious and aesthetic modes of truth as well. In this conception, fullness of human consciousness results from allowing the objects of nature to more fully reveal themselves, that is, by a greater plurality of modes. We can resist the overwhelming power of modern technology to reduce our worldview to the harnessing of forces for consumption by recovering the sensibilities of the craftsman or artisan or poet, second, an approach that examines the relationship of technology and human nature, characterized by the work of Lewis Mumford; third is an approach that seeks to define modern technology primarily in terms of its social relations, an approach taken by French philosopher Jacques Ellul, who we will examine in this chapter.

which, he holds, was the pinnacle of ancient Greek culture. All *poeisis* is revealing; just as nature allows a tree to come out of a seedling, the artist brings forth a pot out of clay, or a song out of silence, and our sense of wonder and respect for the object is retained. Such objects reveal (as does all good art) an almost limitless array of meanings. In this way we enjoy a harmonious relationship with nature, rather than one that seeks only to corral and consume it. For Heidegger, this “saving power” regarding technology lies in our ability to listen, reflect and witness. Thus from early on in modern philosophical reflection, the need to watch and listen – to *pay attention*, as McLuhan will advise – was postulated as a corrective to the utilitarian functionalizing of the natural world and our perceptions of it.

### 1.2 Ellul on Technique

If Heidegger remained prophetic yet generally optimistic that such correctives were possible, the French Protestant philosopher Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) had a much more expansive, if negative prognostication. For Ellul, technology, or “technique” as he claims is the more accurate term, is not something exterior to the human person, found objectively in machines and devices. Rather, technique was something in the human mind, a lens through which we look at the world, and which in a technological civilization spreads to dominate every aspect of human life. In his “Note to the Reader” added to the American edition of the 1965 book *The Technological Society* he defined technique as the “totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity.”

$$^14$$ He denies there is continuity with the past, insisting that modern society is based on technique in an unprecedented and totalizing way:

> When technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. It is no longer face to face with man but is integrated with him, and it progressively absorbs him, in this respect, technique is radically different from the machine. This transformation, so obvious in modern society, is the result of the fact that technique has become autonomous.$$^15$$

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The main point for Ellul was that technique was internalized within us, and characterized by constantly emphasizing *means* over ends. Its raison d’être was the search for greater efficiency, and like Heidegger’s distinction between the basic technology of human history and modern technology, Ellul believed that technique had become a voracious omnivore that sought the pursuit of the optimal efficient means in all human activity. Calculating reason systematically applied had replaced spontaneous insight and practical wisdom in order to produce “clear, voluntary and reasoned concepts”\(^\text{16}\) – a strong echo of Descartes’ own criterion of truth, the “clear and distinct ideas”, which were the heralds of the new scientific age. What was already being eclipsed was the importance of *ends*, a loss of the teleological sense of human life and activity. As Ellul wrote:

> The twofold intervention of reason and consciousness in the technical world, which produces the technical phenomenon, can be described as the quest of the one best means in every field. And this “one best means” is, in fact, the technical means. It is the aggregate of these means that produces technical civilization.\(^\text{17}\)

In a technological civilization, called a *technocracy* by Neil Postman, “a science of techniques, progressively elaborated”\(^\text{18}\) determines the actions and habits of the human person. Machines multiply continuously, and require their creators and users to adapt to their own inherent logic. One does not interact with the machine-culture in the same way one interacted with the natural world and pre-technological tools. Cars require that we learn the mechanical operation of driving and our communities are redesigned around them; clocks in the work-place require that we regulate our lives by them; the computer, above all, exemplifies the progressively ubiquitous influence of technique over human affairs, which, according to Ellul, is a condition of oppression of genuine human freedom. He explains this point:

> The network of all the machines – those in the factories, those used for transport, those used in offices, those used for entertainment, those having to do with food, sanitation, and communication – causes the whole society to be modified – scale of values, processes of judgement, customs, and manners – and creates a situation in which there is no exact center where man can

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 20.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 21.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid.
pretend to lay his hand on the machine (which machine?) in complete independence and utilize it as he sees fit! If man does utilize the machine, it is within a society that has already been modified, nay transformed, by the machine without reference to the will or decision of man.\textsuperscript{19}

The fact that machines were designed and created by human beings in the first place, risks missing Ellul’s main assertion: in sufficient quantity, machines cease to be servants of human use, but require society to be made over in their image, according to their own principles, and at the expense of human freedom. This state has nothing in common with the technical phenomenon of the past. The key features of the contemporary technical phenomenon are, according to Ellul, its utter (1) rationality, (2) artificiality, (3) technical automatism, (4) self-augmentation, (5) monism, (6) universalism, and (7) autonomy.

Ellul doesn’t dwell on rationality – which he claims is a discourse and method that “excludes spontaneity and personal creativity” – nor artificiality (which he defines as that which is “opposed to nature”), since he holds they are commonly recognized aspects of technology, but moves on to focus on the other five. Automatism refers to the fact that “inside the technical circle, the choice of methods, mechanism, organizations, and formulas is carried out automatically”\textsuperscript{20}, and that technology has a power over all other forms of activity. Mathematical analysis of situations yields “the one right way” of proceeding, and thus tends to the self-augmentation or growth of the technological phenomenon.\textsuperscript{21} Ellul will even say that technique “is progressing almost without decisive intervention by man.”\textsuperscript{22} All the trades and professions, education, government, medicine, and industry are committed to the advancement of technique; its automatic growth is

\textsuperscript{20} Ellul, The Technological Society, 32.
\textsuperscript{21} On the relationship of machine-logic’s determinism to the abuse of human dignity, Joseph Ratzinger has said the following: “The Apocalypse speaks about God’s antagonist, the beast. This animal does not have a name, but a number. . . . In their horror, they [Nazi concentration camps] cancel faces and history, transforming man into a number, reducing him to a cog in an enormous machine. Man is no more than a function. . . . In our days, we should not forget that they prefigured the destiny of a world that runs the risk of adopting the same structure of the concentration camps, if the universal law of the machine is accepted. The machines that have been constructed impose the same law. According to this logic, man must be interpreted by a computer and this is only possible if translated into numbers. The beast is a number and transforms into numbers. God, however, has a name and calls by name. He is a person and looks for the person” (from a talk by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Palermo, Sicily, March 15, 2000).
\textsuperscript{22} Ellul, The Technological Society, 85.
assured by the multiplication of scientists and technicians, and, one might add, by the computer and web-based professionals who characterize the modern “information-based” economy. Monism and universalism are two aspects of the same thing, the first referring to technique’s aspect of being an all-encompassing unity, even if appearing in diverse forms, and the second referring to its geographical spread in every community and culture. As such, monism and universalism mean that the logic of technique is truly global and totalizing:

The technical phenomenon presents, everywhere and essentially, the same characteristics. It is useless to look for differentiations. They do exist, but only secondarily. The common features of the technical phenomenon are so sharply drawn that it is easy to discern that which is the technical phenomenon and that which is not.23

The autonomy of technique is probably the easiest to misunderstand. Ellul does not mean that technology develops independently from human action, but rather that human action takes place without, or at least rarely looking at any standard other than a technical one. The key principle behind technique is, again, that of rational efficiency, and as machines proliferate, they become the determining factor behind human action.

There may be some weaknesses in Ellul’s view of the totalitarian effects of modern technology. Were our primitive ancestors really more “free” in their relationships to the techniques of their particular cultures? Is the rational specification of “the one best means” that characterizes technique really not compatible with human freedom? What exactly is Ellul’s notion of human freedom? According to his description in The Technological Society, we are all essentially slaves to the tyranny of technique, and the outlook is rather bleak for the human person. Indeed, when revisiting the theme twenty-five years later in The Technological Bluff, he asks rhetorically, but with more than a hint of desperation:

Is this a closed situation? Is there no way out? Is collective spiritual and material suicide the only result that is incontestably held out to us by the actual bluff of technology?... If we have any chance of emerging from this

23 Ibid., 94-95.
ideologico-material vice, of finding an exit from this terrible swamp that is ours, above all things we must avoid the mistake of thinking that we are free.\textsuperscript{24}

Despite this, it would be a mistake to confine Ellul solely to the role of the jeremiad issuing dystopian. His positive vision for freedom – albeit a freedom \textit{from} technology – did envision “on the one hand, the creation of new forms (political, moral, religious, aesthetic), and on the other hand, the struggle against structures (technical, economic, bureaucratic and also mental)\textsuperscript{25} that he viewed as oppressive. If the problem is tyranny and if freedom means opposing tyranny, Ellul believed Christianity brought the ethics of liberation. He described the two most important events in his life as his conversion to Marxism at age nineteen, then his conversion to Christianity three years later.\textsuperscript{26} The Christian vision in him supersedes the Marxist: it is not a question of restructuring economic or material structures, but of the choices of the individual person from within a technocracy. “As the source of hope,” he wrote, “I mean the individual who does not lend himself to society’s game, who disputes what we accept as self-evident (for example, the consuming society), who finds an autonomous style of life.”\textsuperscript{27} Nor does Ellul advocate anarchism, for, it bears repeating, he is not against technology per se; but he recognized that most of the revolutionary movements of his century merely replaced one set of actors with another, while retaining the basic structures of the technocratic bureaucracy. Ultimately, “it is not a question of getting rid of it, but, by an act of freedom, of transcending it.”\textsuperscript{28} Since the individual’s autonomy is under attack in a society where one’s ability to judge for oneself is continually reduced by the “networks of information…and propaganda in diverse forms,”\textsuperscript{29} what is needed is a \textit{critical renewal}. What Ellul is envisioning here exactly is difficult to pin down, but he appears to be

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Jacques Ellul, \textit{The Technological Bluff} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 411.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Whereas for Marx the fundamental social principle was capital, Ellul was convinced that “technique was by far the most important phenomenon, and that it was necessary to start from there to understand everything else.” In “From Jacques Ellul...”, in \textit{Introducing Jacques Ellul} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 5-6, and cited by Carl Mitcham and Robert Mackey in “Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society”, \textit{Philosophy Today}, Summer 1971, 104.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Ellul, “Between Chaos and Paralysis”, 748.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ellul, \textit{The Technological Society}, xxxi.
  \item \textsuperscript{29} Ellul, “Between Chaos and Paralysis”, 749.
\end{itemize}
hoping for new forms of prophetic witness – of being in the world but not of it – through what he terms a new “radical subjectivity” that will transform society:

[It] will inform also the three human passions which seem to be the essential ones – the passions to create, to love, to play… it is in the building of a new daily life, in the discovery of things, acts, situations utterly different from those that society would fasten on us, that this subjectivity can express itself.  

This love he explicitly identifies as Christian. The hippie movement had been inspired by a genuine impulse against technological society, and had realized that love was the “great project of communication” between people. But it was their lack of critical powers that led to them falling “into a sexual laxity which is a parody of love.” Nor is the solution to “drop out” of society, but rather to become a “creator of one’s own life”, while carrying on one’s profession and living in society at the same time. The only energy for this kind of action cannot come from human wisdom alone: “I am convinced that Christians are absolutely the only ones who can attempt it… only the Christian faith (and no other belief or revolutionary stimulus) gives man sufficient hope to prompt him to embark on the undertaking I have described.” He excoriated Christians for being the most compliant and conformist, but had faith that “the good news of the gospel affirms precisely that in Christ and through Christ we are free (provided we live the faith!)… to the Christian is given a freedom through which he (and only he!) can challenge the slaveries of whatever kind and escape them himself.”

There are certain similarities in the diagnoses of both Heidegger and Ellul. Modern society has become technological in a way that defines our world-view as well as our actions, and has changed our relationship with nature from one of harmony, creativity and intuition, to one of exploitation. While freedom (for love), is the answer, the means of achieving it are elusive, but to be found in prophetic witness and, at least for Ellul, in a spirit of Christian hope. While Ellul did not live to see the Internet emerge as a dominating cultural force, one can project his principles onto our current state with ease, and ask the same question: does the emerging digital environment make us more free,

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 749.
33 Ibid., 750.
creative, intuitive, wise and loving? Or are we captives of its mechanical and deterministic characteristics as Ellul would have argued?

1.3 George Grant on Wonder and Freedom

The philosopher George Grant (1918-1988) saw the recovery of a sense of the transcendentals (truth, goodness and beauty) as an urgent and remedial need in our technological civilization. Grant was once a prominent fixture on the intellectual landscape of Canada in the 1970s, roaming alongside giants like Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye during the University of Toronto’s golden age. In his 1969 book *Technology and Empire*, Grant lamented that the idea of progress had lost its connection to moral development and had been co-opted into a utilitarian mastery of nature to satisfy human appetites. Like Heidegger and Ellul, he was not blind to the multitude of benefits wrought by science and technology, and struggled to hold them in tension with his growing criticism of the emerging technologized person. He, too, was confident that we had internalized technology as a *way of thinking*, and could not step “outside” ourselves to see what we had become. He wrote that while we can easily comprehend the many ways in which we have profited from technological society,

we cannot so easily hold the ways it may have deprived us, because technique is ourselves. All descriptions or definitions of technique which place it outside ourselves hide it from us what it is... It is difficult to think whether we are deprived of anything essential to our happiness, just because the coming to be of the technological society has stripped us above all of the very systems of meaning which disclosed the highest purposes of man, and in terms of which, therefore, we could judge whether an absence of something was in fact a deprival.34

Grant realized that the post-modern rejection of any and all meta-narratives to describe the meaning of human existence – above all the philosophical and moral jettisoning of metaphysics – and the consequent impossibility of holding any objective *end* or purpose of the human person, meant that there were no criteria to guide technological development other than a certain “inevitability”. When it comes to technology, just because we can, so it seems inevitably we must. Grant held that the freedom to advance

34 George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 137.
scientifically was the only conceivable notion of freedom that our society could now understand, because knowledge and meaning could only be revealed through the scientific method: “Every development of technique is an exercise of freedom by those who develop it, and as the exercise of freedom is the only meaning, the [technological] changes can only be publicly known as the unfolding of meaning.”

To attempt the recovery of a sense of telos, Grant poses as a question whether we might acknowledge the existence of “presence” as something that might limit (in a philosophical sense) or guide the creation of our artifices and devices. It is a notion that reminds one of Heidegger's notion of Being, a way of speaking about God in the world without involving the God of revelation. The question also attempts to moderate the unbridled sovereignty of technological “potentiality”:

Despite the noblest modern thought, which teaches always the exaltation of potentiality above all that is, has anyone been able to show us conclusively throughout a comprehensive account of both the human and non-human things, that we must discard the idea of a presence above which potentiality cannot be exalted? … Equally it would be immoderate and uncourageous and perhaps unwise to live in the midst of our present drive, merely working in it and celebrating it, and not also listening or watching or simply waiting for intimations of deprival which might lead us to see the beautiful as the image, in the world, of the good.

Grant is asking how we might be observant to what we are losing in the midst of all our gains, and to discover a means of transcending the limits of the horizontal mindset of technique. His concern is for the recovery of the “the beautiful”, which is an image of “the good”, a sense that can only be cultivated by contemplation. Nearly twenty years later, Grant would return to his theme with a book, Technology and Justice (1986), in which he reprised the need for metaphysical principles to guide our technological development, to step outside the materialist paradigm that technology itself commands:

For those who affirm that the justice or injustice of some actions can be known in advance of the necessities of time and of the calculation of means, there is a pressing need to understand our technological destiny from principles more comprehensive than its own.... We are called to understand

35 Ibid., 139.
36 Ibid., 143.
Like Ellul, Grant believed that somehow humanity had to find a way to break through the limitations of the consciousness fostered by technique. His cause was the restoration of our poetic and creaturely sense of wonder, recoverable when we realize again that “we are not alone”. By this Grant meant that we can recover our true selves only when we recover our true meaning in God. In a chapter in *Technology and Empire* called “In Defence of North America”, Grant studies the particularity of the dominant cultural forms that this continent has pioneered (and presently exports around the world). He argues that the predominantly Calvinist Protestantism upon which these cultural and economic forms were founded, had rejected the essentialist philosophy of medieval Aristotelianism, with its teleological doctrine and notion of substantial forms, which they found too “natural”, potentially leading souls away from a basic reliance on Christian revelation. In addition to their rejection of natural theology, the Calvinists also abolished the absolute goodness and rationality of the Divine activity into mere separate will-acts, connected by no inner necessity and no metaphysical unity of substance, essentially [tending] to the emphasizing of the individual and empirical, the renunciation of the conceptions of absolute causality and unity, the practically free and utilitarian individual judgement of all things. The influence of this spirit is quite unmistakably the most important cause of the empirical and positivist tendencies of the Anglo-Saxon spirit…38

While Calvinism has largely ceased being a definitive religious force in North America, the philosophical forms it established continue to be culturally defining: its practical and self-determining optimism trusts in technology to create a rational “kingdom of man.” Without a mitigating religiosity, the result is a subtly materialist and immanentist conception of the world. Grant “the Christian philosopher” believed that we needed to recover an acknowledgment of our limitations and contingency – an act of cultural humility, perhaps – and relearn to see things in their own intrinsic gratuity:

It may perhaps be said negatively that what has been absent for us is the affirmation of a possible apprehension of the world beyond that as a field of

38 George Grant, *Technology and Empire* (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), 137. Grant is actually citing here a quotation of Ernst Troeltsch’s, from his book *Protestantism and Progress*. 
objects considered as pragmata – an apprehension present not only in its height as “theory” but as the undergirding of our loves and friendships, of our arts and reverences, and indeed as the setting for dealing with the objects of the human and the non-human world.\textsuperscript{39}

He described the existential position to be recovered, which involved the attitude of wonder that the human person should have at the glory of life, of participating in the mystery of \textit{being}:

Perhaps we are lacking the recognition that our response to the whole should not most deeply be that of doing, nor even that of terror and anguish, but that of wondering or marveling at what is, being amazed or astonished by it... and that such a stance, as beyond all bargains and conveniences, is the only source from which purposes may be manifest to us for our necessary calculating.\textsuperscript{40}

In the end, like Heidegger and Ellul before him, Grant is lamenting the loss of the \textit{contemplative} disposition in Western society, that inheritance from Greek civilization that flowered in Christian and Jewish culture, and which he claims has been suffocated by the regnant pragmatic neoliberalism. In his book, \textit{Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God}, the American theologian David L. Schindler revisits the thought of Grant, and to answer the possible charge of pessimism, cites Sheila Grant, the late philosopher's widow, who relayed a simple statement that her husband had repeated throughout his life: “It always matters what each of us does.”\textsuperscript{41} Schindler believes that Grant pointed to what is ultimately the only credible response to charges that Christianity is an unrealistic solution: the witness of “each one’s entire way of life, as carried in the whole of one’s countless concrete acts, thoughts and gestures.”\textsuperscript{42} While underlining Ellul’s basic belief that the Christian had the key to unlocking the cycle of technological determinism by the witness of their faith, hope and love, it is also a reminder that fundamental to the Christian life is the call to be witnesses, in person, word and deed. This may be the most “effective means” (but in \textit{God’s} time and manner) of teaching right relationship with objects, fellow creatures, and God himself.

\textsuperscript{39} George Grant, \textit{Technology and Empire}, 35.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 287.
What emerges clearly from these philosophers are the following points. Modern technology changes our relationship with the natural world from one of harmony to one that looks upon it as a resource to be consumed. This relationship is caused by the interiorization of *technique*, a way of looking at the world that seeks efficiency of means in all things, and which loses the ability to see beyond its own framework to guiding criteria of a teleological nature. This radical immanence can only be pierced by new forms of wisdom and witness, attainable by means of contemplation. Since these theorists do not strictly define what is meant by contemplation, our next chapter will examine its possibilities under the rubric of silence. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to update their reflections with certain concerns that are being provoked by the new digital environments.

2 Concerns of the Electronic-Digital Age

The profound changes that electronic media induce in the human person may have their genesis in the inherent effects of modern technology or technique, but they became more noticeable with the invention of television – which, as McLuhan noted, is simply radio pushed to its extreme (as the Internet, one might argue, is television pushed to its extreme through interactivity and control). The advent of television in the 1950s produced a dramatic change in human thinking and social interaction, with effects that were most acute in children, understandable given the brain’s heightened plasticity in the early stages of life.

2.1 The Impact of Television

Still upheld as an example in its field for the conditions and quality of its research,43 is Tannis Macbeth William’s *The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities,*

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43 On this study, psychology writer Joan M. Preston wrote that “The quality of the research is excellent. The overall design and each part of the study show careful attention to issues, well-considered methodologies, and relevant data analyses. Considerable time and effort was devoted to obtaining high-quality data… [and] the completeness of the data analysis is impressive…This book is certain to stand as a classic. See Joan M. Preston, “Review of the Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities,” *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne* 28, no. 3 (1987): 298-99.
In 1973 researchers at the University of British Columbia heard that a small community in the Rocky Mountains had been unable to receive television signals because of their remote location in a valley, but had successfully petitioned the government to build them a transmitter. Since the town would receive television nearly two decades after the rest of the world, Williams and twelve other faculty and students from UBC began extensive surveys in the town, which they coded “Notel”, as well as control studies in a nearby town with only one television station (“Unitel”), and another town with many channels (“Multitel”). They studied the towns twice: once before television came to Notel (Phase One), and again after it had television for two years (Phase Two). The three towns were similar in population (around 700 within town limits), economic base (logging, mining, and farming), income (around $7000 per family), and class structure (10% professional/business, 60% skilled labor/farmers, 20-30% unskilled labor). All the towns had small libraries, weekly newspapers, telephones, and regular road and rail service. It is worth examining the results of this study as they reveal the effects of electronic media upon cognitive development and social relations in a particularly dramatic way.

Two years after the introduction of television, the research found that athletic and sporting activities in the town dropped by half. People over 55 years of age were particularly affected by television, as their participation in all public events dropped dramatically. The researchers thought this would contribute to a widening gap between the young and old, since the elderly would be seen less by the young. Child cognition was also affected. The main test used was called “Alternate Uses,” in which school children were given five objects (a magazine, a knife, a shoe, a button, and a key) and asked to write down all the different uses they could think of for them without any time limit. They tested grades four and seven, then the same students two years later in grades six and nine, and there was a noticeable drop in the numbers. The raw scores fell from 32 in Notel Phase One to the low 20s in Phase Two, a drop of about 40%. Likewise, reading fluency fell significantly. This was measured by means of a device that flashed a word on

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a screen for a few milliseconds, and the subject’s speed in word recognition was measured. Grade two and three reading fluency was higher in Notel than in Unitel and Multitel in Phase One, but by Phase Two, had dropped to similar levels with the other two towns. The researchers hypothesized that television hindered the acquisition of reading skills simply because it took up so much time. Reading is a difficult skill and doesn't become pleasurable or useful until you're good at it. If television distracts from the practice of reading at that crucial stage, one may never acquire good reading habits. Finally, levels of aggression between children in the schoolyard had doubled in Notel by Phase Two. In sum, the introduction of television cut participation in non-television leisure activities, decreased creativity scores, harmed the acquisition of reading skills, and made children more aggressive.

Were these effects universally experienced, or limited to small-town British Columbia? Williams and her team end the book discussing their belief that their results are generalizable for several reasons: first, the test scores of children in these towns by Phase Two matched those in all the rest of Canada. Second, the changes were much more pronounced between Notel and Unitel/Multitel than between Unitel and Multitel, suggesting that the presence of television itself was the important factor, and not its content. Finally, these conclusions with respect to television matched those of other studies.

The effects of television upon Notel appear to confirm McLuhan’s oft-quoted observation that “we become what we behold…we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.” It may be that the community suffered deleterious effects on account of the “jarring” nature of the sudden transition from predominantly print to electronic culture. While this may be true, I also suggest that the symptoms Williams et al. reported were not transitory, but remain endemic to the electronic age. After all, Unitel and Multitel had lower literacy levels overall, and rare is the college professor in the digital age today who has not observed a similar decline in literacy skills in the classroom. The observations in

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The Impact of Television extend what Heidegger, Ellul and Grant feared were the effects of modern technology: fragmentation and separation, as evinced by the disconnect in the towns between generations, between persons and nature as evidenced by the decrease in outdoor leisure activities, and between the capacity of the young for concentration, creativity and literacy.

2.2 The Cognitive Effects of Digital Media

The same troubling results of the introduction of television are magnified in the Internet age. Today, when there are many indicators that people are using digital technologies at ever-rising rates, new questions are being raised about its possible negative side effects. When Nicholas Carr wrote a cover story in 2008 for Atlantic Monthly provocatively titled “Is Google Making us Stupid,” there was a surge in debate over the effects of long-time exposure to the Internet, particularly on the part of the “digital natives”, the generation that has grown up with it. Carr’s book on the subject, the Pulitzer-nominated The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains, catalogued emerging neurological studies on Internet use, to make the case that unless users become conscious of the effects of digital media on their brains and take balancing action, they risk under-developing and losing certain human capacities such as deep-reading, long-term memory, contemplation and ultimately what we might call wisdom.

Carr’s thesis rests upon neuroscience’s growing understanding of the plasticity of human brain. In short, neural pathways form through repeated use – the reception of sense data and how we think with it. Thus the brain retains a certain flexibility, and as a result, enjoys certain positive benefits, such as adaptability to changing circumstances, treatability of mental illnesses and injuries, and our general capacity to develop new skills and expand our mental horizons. At the same time, neuroplasticity does not mean elasticity: our neural pathways don’t automatically return to previous states, but hold onto their changed state through repeated sets of behaviour and thought. So while it can be

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“the mechanism for development and learning,” neuroplasticity can also be “a cause of pathology.” Carr quotes research psychiatrist Norman Doidge, who says that we can be locked into rigid behaviours, since once a new pathway has been wired, “we long to keep it activated.” Neglect of our minds, on the flip side, can mean the possibility of intellectual decay; our neurons are quite uninterested in the quality of our thoughts. Doidge writes that “if we stop exercising our mental skills we do not just forget them: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead.” In short, what we do with our minds – our imagination, memory and reasoning – matters. “We become what we contemplate,” wrote Plato in the 4th century before Christ. Today, neuroscience is essentially confirming the same observation, although perhaps with a greater emphasis on how we contemplate, alongside the content of our thoughts.

On February 29, 2012, the first results of a massive Pew Research Center study on the consequences of growing up in the networked world were released. The survey asked more than 1000 technology experts – communications and technology professors, philosophers and professionals – whether it appeared as if the total effect of today’s hyperconnectivity would be generally positive or negative by the year 2020. The results were almost evenly split. Although many admitted they were merely being hopeful, about half agreed that in 2020 the brains of multitasking teenagers and young adults would be “wired” differently from those over age 35, but that the scenario would generally be positive:

They do not suffer notable cognitive shortcomings as they multitask and cycle quickly through personal- and work-related tasks. Rather, they are learning more and they are more adept at finding answers to deep questions, in part because they can search more effectively and access collective intelligence via

50 Doidge, quote in Carr, 35.
the Internet. In sum, the changes in learning behaviour and cognition among
the young generally produce positive results.52

Clearly a best-outcome scenario, this was an optimistic reading of current trends. The
other half of respondents, however, sided with another vision of the current trajectory.
They agreed that the mental “wiring” of the youth would indeed be different from their
elders, but:

They do not retain information; they spend most of their energy sharing short
social messages, being entertained, and being distracted away from deep
engagement with people and knowledge. They lack deep-thinking capabilities;
they lack face-to-face social skills; they depend in unhealthy ways on the
internet and mobile devices to function. In sum, the changes in behaviour and
cognition among the young are generally negative outcomes.53

While nobody knows exactly what the future effects of digital media consumption on the
human person will be, nor how our user habits may mature with time, the second scenario
would confirm Carr’s thesis that the hyperkinetic way in which the Internet functions, the
way the medium urges the user to click on an endlessly promising succession of
stimulating links and sensual stimuli, is not only addictive,54 but is forming the mind in a
way that is post-literate and tends toward superficial thinking.55 Most importantly, it may
be preventing users from developing the skills for deep-reading and memory. The
Internet does not favour the transfer of knowledge from working memory to long-term
memory. As Carr observes, reading gives the mind the time it needs to transfer
knowledge from working to long-term memory, to “absorb” concepts by means of

52 Ibid., 2.
53 Ibid.
54 Studies show that using the Internet is a dopamine-releasing activity, similar to sexual activity,
and seems to have an inherently addictive quality. See Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan, iBrain:
55 Carr observes “there’s nothing wrong with absorbing information quickly and in bits and
pieces. We’ve always skimmed newspapers more than we’ve read them, and we routinely run our
eyes over books and magazines to get the gist of a piece of writing and decide whether it warrants
more thorough reading. The ability to scan and browse is as important as the ability to read
depthly and think attentively. The problem is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of
thought. Once a means to an end, a way to identify information for further study, it’s becoming an
end in itself—our preferred method of both learning and analysis. Dazzled by the Net’s treasures,
we are blind to the damage we may be doing to our intellectual lives and even our culture.”
repetition and “thimble-full” trickle-rates that long-term memory acquisition requires:

when we read a book, the information faucet provides a steady drip, which we can control by the pace of our reading. Through our single-minded concentration on the text, we can transfer all or most of the information, thimbleful by thimbleful, into long-term memory and forge the rich associations essential to the creation of schema. With the Net, we face many informational faucets, all going full blast. Our little thimbleful overflows as we rush from one faucet to the next. We’re able to transfer only a small portion of the information to long-term memory, and what we do transfer is a jumble of drops from different faucets, not a continuous, coherent stream from one source.56

The concerns, therefore, that Carr and contemporary neurologists are pointing to, imply that the emerging digital environments may be costing us more than just our attachment to the paradigmatic habits of a text-based society. The losses, these studies suggest, imply that the basic human capacity for learning may be in jeopardy, and that without careful regulation, may result in a human formation that lacks both intellectual and spiritual depth. It may be difficult to hear “the still small voice” of God when one’s senses are constantly bombarded with artificial visual and audio stimulation. Growth in the knowledge of God, which arises from meditation on his Word, is stunted when one’s general capacity for contemplation is diminished from disuse. It is at this point that the habitual experience of silence might provide the necessary counter-balance to the bombardment of words and stimuli that form the ground of the digital media environment.

56 Carr, 124-25.
Chapter 2
The Remedial Power of Silence

Nous nous taisons. Heureux ceux, heureux deux amis, qui s’aiment assez, qui veulent assez se plaire, qui se connaissent, qui s’entendent assez, qui sont assez parents, qui pensent et sentent assez de même assez ensemble en dedans, chacun séparément, assez les mêmes, chacun côte à côte, de marcher longtemps, longtemps, d’aller, de marcher silencieusement le long des silencieuses routes. Heureux deux amis, qui s’aiment assez pour (savoir) se taire ensemble. Dans un pays qui sait se taire. Nous montions. Nous nous taisions. Depuis longtemps nous nous taisions.

– Charles Péguy, Solvuntur Objecta

1 Metaphysics of Silence and Word

When on January 24, 2012 Pope Benedict XVI issued his message for World Communications Day, the topic, given the occasion, seemed at first surprising: silence. In his text, Benedict made the case that silence and word require one another in order for authentic communication to flourish, not merely in a thesis-antithesis, environment/anti-environment sense – although this is also true – but because “silence is an integral part of communication,” and that when they complement each another, “communication acquires value and meaning.” How does this inherent mutuality work? First, silence is required for us to truly understand ourselves and for the formulation of our ideas – especially if they are to be of any depth – as they require a measure of contemplative reflection in order to come to fruition. This echoes Carr’s thesis that sustained “deep reading”, with its repetitions, pauses, and slow absorption through reflection on multiple angles, is necessary for long-term memory retention, which in turn is the basis of what the tradition calls wisdom. If we have pondered something in silence we are better able to grasp its many possible connections and express it more clearly.

58 Ibid.
What is more, silence is necessary for mutual listening: it requires and fosters a sensitivity to the other, and creates a space for a genuine communion between persons. In an age “when messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary”59 – silence is also needed for the discernment that is a constitutive part of authentic communication. Benedict goes on to say that for this balance and integration between silence and word to take place, “it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of ‘eco-system’ that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds.”60 The Pope, it appears, has also as his concern the proper human integration with the digital environments of society.

If the major concern of the contemporary chroniclers of digital effects on human consciousness is the drift towards perpetual distraction and cognitive superficiality, then perhaps a more intentional engagement with silence is the answer. Silence, in this case, should not be understood merely as the absence of noise – words, images and sounds – but rather as a rich, positive entity that lends its fullness to our experience of sense data. Perhaps the most significant thinker on the phenomenon of silence was the Swiss philosopher Max Picard, whose 1952 book The World of Silence, continues to be as relevant today as it was in the “radio era” in which he wrote it.61 In his commentary on Picard’s book, the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel notes that for the empirical or evolutionary tradition, “Picard’s metaphysics of silence lose any possible meaning; they become absurd,”62 and this is true. There is nothing that is directly verifiable by empirical means about what Picard says about the nature of silence. But Marcel cites Wilhelm von Humboldt’s insight that human language cannot be simply reduced to a system of signs, but has the nature of a gift that is given to the human creature almost immediately.

This sheds light, then, on the nature of the silence from which the word comes forth, and

59 Benedict XVI, Silence and Word.
60 Ibid.
61 Sadly now out of print, Picard’s monograph is an often aphoristic and poetic reflection on silence in its phenomenological and metaphysical dimensions. I am grateful to both Dr. Edoardo Rialti of the University of Florence and Dr. Eric McLuhan for recommending this text. See Max Picard, The World of Silence (Chicago: Regnery, 1952).
62 Gabriel Marcel, in Picard, World of Silence, 10.
how silence lends words their legitimacy. To illustrate analogically, Picard says that when two people speak with each other, there is always a third presence, and that third is Silence. When two people merely chatter at each other, as it were, silence is no longer present. In our media culture of constant verbiage and mental noise, silence is marginalized even further, and has led, ultimately, to the loss of our “sense of the meaning of contemplation.” Our talking today comes only out of the field of other words, not out of the silence, and as a result is more frenetic and aggressive as it is unhinged. We do not speak from the deep well of inner silence.

Marcel observes that Picard’s depth of thinking is not one that methodically moves from its premises to conclusions – the strictly logical kind of reflection – which here would lose grasp of the very truths it was attempting to convey. Rather, he notes that Picard’s is “a thinking which sees.” The true philosopher, Marcel holds, is closer in nature to the poet, and this, in his eyes, is precisely the kind of thinking that must counter-balance the mechanical world of technique:

All Max Picard’s meditative activity is directed towards a kind of possible wholeness of being, and this wholeness is today endangered not only by technical progress, but by the will to power of those of whom techniques are only the blind instruments; though they risk seeing these instruments becoming masters – still, of course, the blind masters – of those whom they are supposed to serve.

Thus Picard’s metaphysics of silence functions as a prophetic word to the age of technology, as a “recall” to one of the fundamental structures of human existence. Silence is our “restraint” on the potential excesses of a culture premised upon unbridled technological progress, our criterion for discernment for the integration of digital noise in our lives. First, however, let us determine what Picard means when he refers to the phenomenon of silence, while remembering that his text is not a manual, but itself requires extrapolation and pondering.

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63 Heidegger also was concerned that speech was degenerating more and more into gerede, or chatter, which was making us less able to appreciate the value of silence.
64 Picard, 11.
65 Ibid., 13.
66 Ibid., 14.
Picard mentions several times that silence is not merely negative space (the absence of noise or speech), but is richly positive, a world in itself. It is also something like the ground of human existence. He writes that “silence has greatness simply because it is. It is, and that is its greatness, its pure existence. There is no beginning to silence and no end: it seems to have its origins in the time when everything was still pure Being. It is like uncreated, everlasting Being.” This womb-like quality of silence strongly implies a Divine connection, as if silence were the communicative eloquence of God. Silence evokes that which is eternal, for silence per se – i.e., the dimension to which we return when our noise subsides – does not have a beginning or end in and of itself. We return to it at night when we sleep, when we rest from the human activity and noise that characterizes our days. Silence is thus like the earth from which our physical bodies emerged.

Silence is connected to Being, that which all entities share, and that from which differentiation occurs. Picard states that “silence contains everything within itself. It is not waiting for anything; it is always wholly present in itself and it completely fills out the space in which it appears.” The fullness of silence, is a fullness that even time cannot manipulate, for silence “does not develop or increase in time, but time increases in silence. It is as though time had been sown into silence, as though silence had absorbed it.” One might add further that only in attentive silence does the beholder perceive the measure of space. Thus both time and space seem to have silence as their ground.

Silence, notes Picard, is also “the only phenomenon today that is ‘useless’. It does not fit into the world of profit and utility; it simply is. It seems to have no other purpose; it cannot be exploited.” This largely unmarketable quality of silence means that silence

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67 Ibid., 17.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 18.
70 Ibid.
71 Excepting, perhaps, those industries that sell silence by marketing their resorts as places for the experience of quiet. For example: “Those in the developed world now have recourse for that addiction: technology-free vacations. For the right price, anyone can get away from their gadgets – staying in hotels that don’t allow personal electronics, or visiting areas that have no Wi-Fi access and are distant from cell towers. The upscale Ultima Thule Lodge in Alaska, accessible
is essentially contrary to that overall effect of modern technology that Heidegger lamented: viewing nature primarily as “a confluence of forces” to be harnessed and used. Since silence “is ‘unproductive’...and interferes with the regular flow of the purposeful” it also has a healing effect: “it strengthens the untouchable, it lessens the damage inflicted by exploitation. It makes things whole again, by taking them back from the world of dissipation into the world of wholeness. It gives things something of its own uselessness, for that is what silence itself is: holy uselessness.”

It is common for people today to remark upon how their electronic devices, designed and marketed as being timesaving tools, seem to have only accelerated expectations of being productive. Silence is the absence of things that speed up the expectations of doing; it restores us to who we are.

But Picard goes deeper still. Silence is more than just healing balm; is a “Holy Wilderness” where “existence and activity are one”, for “silence gives to things inside it something of the power of its own autonomous being. The autonomous being in things is strengthened in silence. That which is developable and exploitable in things vanishes when they are in silence.”

It is not easy to explain what Picard means here, other than what our own intuition or experience might confirm. The man who is silent, for instance, – like Christ before Pilate – has a certain strength or power over his interrogators. The person who is habitually contemplative generally has an aura of self-possession and strong personal identity. There is no one more brimming with character than the monk or nun whose life has been defined by silence, whereas chatterboxes are more likely to be characterized as superficial. The cenobite, who ironically takes a vow of obedience, is also least likely to be a pushover, subject to manipulability, but emanates a sense of personal freedom and intentionality in his words and actions. This is the effect of the nurturing or restorative power of silence. It is something so basic, that “there is nothing to relate to it except the Creator Himself. Silence is original and self-evident like the other

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only by plane and 100 miles from the nearest road, is so remote that digital gadgets can't get a signal. Rooms start at $1,700 per night, with a three-night minimum.” (Brian Patrick Eha, “The Sound of Solitude,” The Atlantic, March 21, 2012, http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/03/the-sound-of-solitude/254480, accessed April 15, 2012).

72 Picard, 19.
73 Ibid.
basic phenomena; like love and loyalty and death and life itself. But it existed before all these and is in all of them.”\textsuperscript{74}

At this point, it might seem tempting to regard speech as a culprit, as something that separates us from a primal unity with God. But Picard has not said this, and goes on, in fact, to affirm the contrary: “The fullness of silence,” he writes poetically, “would have exploded if it had not able to flow out into speech,”\textsuperscript{75} and quotes Heidegger’s statement that “Man reveals himself as the being that speaks.” It was necessary that humanity learn to express itself from the silence in speech:

\begin{quote}
At the beginning of creation, we are told, God Himself spoke with man. It was as though man still did not really dare to speak the word, did not yet dare to possess the word; as though God, by speaking with man, wanted to get man into the habit of using words…The origin of language is impenetrable, like that of every creature, because it came from the perfect love of the Creator. Only if man were to live constantly in perfect love, could he learn the origin of language and of all creatures.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

While its origins remain shrouded in mystery, language is birthed from silence, and silence is only fulfilled when speech flows from it. The two are like sea and land, which define one another, and although the mass of the sea (silence) is greater than that of the land (speech), the land has greater definition and intensity of being.

It is impossible, without literally recreating Picard’s work line by line, to exhaust the many layers of insight that he has wrought, yet suffice to note that he has given depth to Benedict XVI’s point that silence and word are the two aspects of authentic communication that need to be kept in balance. If the electronic-digital environment is becoming increasingly ubiquitous, and is defined by the sensible data it constantly produces for stimulation, distraction and consumption, then such a balancing act must necessary privilege the recovery of silence. For Christians, there are also theological reasons for this recovery.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 26.
2 Theology of Silence and Word

Picard, as a Christian philosopher, holds the incarnation as the axis point of human history, in which the Word appeared and silence was “torn open by speech”, although the Word was on the way from the beginning of time. If silence and speech are perfectly united in God, how might the human person encounter God in the heart of this union? A vast array of 20th century spiritual writers has commented on the value of silence for finding or experiencing the Word of God. Even Picard refers to its transformative power in the context of revelation: “since Christ the Divine Word came down to men from God, the ‘still small voice’, the way of the transformation of silence into speech was traced out for all time.” The writers of sacred scripture convey much about God’s ways with humanity through silence and word.

From early on in the Old Testament, silence is often the occasion of theophany or encounter with God, especially in the desert setting. It is notable in the lives of the patriarchs (Genesis 12-50), as well as the account of the Israelite’s flight from Egypt (Exodus 15:22, 16:1, etc.). The desert is where Israel experiences God’s loving presence and providence, but it also is a place of purification and testing. In the account of the prophet Elijah in exile, however, the nature of God’s presence is made most explicit. After walking for forty days and nights on the strength of a single meal to Mount Horeb (or Mount Sinai, the same mountain where Moses conferred intimately with the Lord in Exodus 19:2-3), Elijah lodges in a cave. Then, while the series of violent natural phenomena occur, Elijah waits to see if the Lord is thereby manifesting his presence: a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire, a still, small voice. And

77 We will cite or refer to many such texts in the following pages, especially the works of Catherine Doherty, Thomas Merton, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne Con Speyr. Other writers include: in the Carmelite tradition, Thomas Dubay, e.g. Fire Within (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990); in the Ignatian tradition, Timothy Gallagher, e.g. Meditation and Contemplation: an Ignatian Guide to Prayer with Scripture (New York: Crossroad, 2008).
78 Picard, 30.
when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (1 Kings 19:11-13)

The primary point of the account appears to be that God’s self-revelation takes place not in loud dramatic events, but in the quietest voice possible (still, small), as if word and silence were closely knit in God’s inner self. The desert remains in scripture a privileged place, where after fasting, or other forms of disciplining the senses, the human person receives God’s self-revelation in the stillness: “I will lead you into solitude and there I shall speak to your heart” (Hosea 2:14).

This dual nature of purification/revelation continues in the New Testament. John the Baptist prepares for his mission in the solitude of the desert (Matt 3:1-12, 1:7-10, Mark 1:3-4; Luke 3:1-20; John 1:23). Then Jesus, after spending nearly thirty years in the relative quiet of his “hidden” life in Nazareth, is led by the Spirit into the desert where he is tempted by the devil and is prepared for his public ministry (Matt 4:1-11). Jesus will return at various points in his public life to the wilderness for the tranquil solitude of meditation and prayer (Matt 14:13; Mark 6:30; Luke 4:42, 5:16; John 6:15). It is there that he communes with his Father, and is strengthened for his active, preaching ministry.

In like manner, St. Paul will spend three years in relative solitude between his conversion and the start of his public ministry: “when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me…I did not confer with flesh and blood…but I went away into Arabia…then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas…” (Gal 1:15-18). Scholars believe that the reference to Arabia here and in Gal 4:25 may suggest that Paul journeyed to the same site of Mt. Sinai/Horeb as did Moses and Elijah before him, and there spoke with God. This is, in any case, almost entirely a wilderness region, where nobody but God could have instructed him.80

This modeling of going into solitude and silence by the prophets, then by Jesus and his first apostles, implies that Christians, likewise called to be witnesses of God, are also

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79 Catholic Bible Dictionary (Doubleday Religion, 2009), s.v. “desert.”
meant to find God’s word by similar means, and then, unless given a particular vocation to the eremitical life (which seem to be relatively rare in the life of the Church), to return to the world renewed in word and spirit.

In the 20th century there have been numerous ecclesial movements and prophetic voices that have sought to chart the way to God through silence in the face of the “noise” of modern society, and are often associated with new forms of the contemplative life. This renewal has seen particular contributions from the spiritual theologians Adrienne von Speyr (1902-1967) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988), whose work on contemplation often favoured its recovery for the laity; one must not neglect noting, as well, the prolific contributions of the American Cistercian Thomas Merton. Contemporary ecclesial groups that center their spiritual lives around the desert experience include The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus, who draw their inspiration from Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), and Madonna House Apostolate, founded in Canada by the exiled Russian baroness Catherine de Hueck Doherty (1896-1985).

Aside from her classic book *Poustinia*, which introduced the Christian spirituality of the East to the Western church, and won several awards (including from the French Academy), Doherty’s own corpus of spiritual theology is only in recent decades being published and studied. This is due in part to ongoing interest in her friendship with

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84 See http://www.madonnahouse.org for more information on both the community and its foundress.
85 Catherine Doherty, *Poustinia* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1975). The title is the Russian word for “desert”.

Merton, and Catholic Worker cofounder Dorothy Day, but also because the mystical theology that she developed in her private journals is now being unpacked as her canonization process goes forward. It is a simple theology, and has a kinship with von Speyr and Balthasar’s Ignatian emphasis on discovering God in the “desert” of the ordinary world – as opposed to a literal wilderness – as well as with the more monastic character of Merton’s reflections. Doherty’s contribution is enriched by the fact that she experienced personally and was blessed with the capacity to articulate the dynamics of God’s relationship to his creatures in silence.

Doherty traces the contours of a disposition to God in the silence, a stance that one might term “active receptivity”. It is essentially “feminine,” having much in common with the rest of the mystical tradition, and also having strong Johannine characteristics of love and contemplation at the foot of the cross. It is receptive, since its whole purpose is to receive the still small voice of God. Yet it is active because it requires an intentional interior posture on the part of the subject. Doherty writes:

There is no solitude without silence. True, silence is sometimes the absence of speech – but it is always the act of listening. The mere absence of noise (which is empty of our listening to the voice of God) is not silence. A day filled with noise and voices can be a day of silence, if the noises become for us the echo of the presence of God, if the voices are, for us, messages and solicitations of God. When we speak of ourselves and are filled with ourselves, we leave silence behind. When we repeat the intimate words of God that he has left within us, our silence remains intact.”

86 For more on the relationship between Merton and Doherty, see Compassionate Fire: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Catherine de Hueck Doherty, edited by Robert Wild (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2009).
89 Doherty, Poustinia, 22-23.
Two things strike us with this passage. First, that for Doherty, an authentic experience of real silence always involves the act of listening – the “active” dimension. This cannot be a passive kind of receptivity, like watching television or taking blows to the stomach. It is more like vigilance or waiting, with the mind and heart alert, like the stance of the wise bridesmaids who await the coming of the bridegroom. One senses that the unfortunate bridesmaids who missed his arrival were actually the more passive ones, perhaps talking away without an adequate and attentive concern for the desired end. Active listening in silence is deliberate, directed towards another. In daily life it does not necessarily involve hearing an audible voice of God, but it can “hear” in human voices a deeper communication that comes from God. This state of communion or connection can continue in actual silence (absence of noise), but is not dependant upon it.90

The second thing that strikes us about Doherty’s insight is that silence is shattered when we speak of ourselves – and one must interpret this to mean a kind of egoistical self-referencing that is not compatible with peaceful interiority. “Silence is truth in charity,” she writes. “It answers him who asks. But it must give only words filled with light. Silence, like everything else, either makes us give ourselves, or it becomes miserliness and avarice, in which we keep ourselves to ourselves.”91 This attitude or disposition, then, is where the peace lies: in orienting our lives to others; thus “deserts, silence, solitudes are not necessarily places but states of mind and heart.”92

How might one go about entering this desert? A major key is our attention and intentionality. Doherty writes that “our hearts, minds, and souls must be attuned, desirous, aware of these moments of solitude that God gives us.” Doherty also believes that we need not be time-bound in our expectations: “we must lose our superstition of time. God laughs at time, for if our souls are open to him, available to him, he can invite

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90 For this reason, Doherty writes that “silence is not the exclusive prerogative of monasteries or convents. This simple, prayerful silence is everybody’s silence –or if it isn’t, it should be. It belongs to every Christian who loves God, to every Jew who has heard in his heart the echoes of God’s voice in his prophets, to everyone whose soul has risen in search of truth, in search of God.” (Doherty, Poustinia, 21).
91 Ibid., 23.
92 Ibid., 21.
them, change them, lift them, transform them in one instant!”

She emphasizes several times “standing still” in order to “allow the strange, deadly restlessness of our tragic age to fall away like the worn-out, dusty cloak that it is” and to “look deep into the motivations of life.”

We must lift “hearts and hands to God” who “will bring order into the soul, God’s order, and God’s order will bring tranquility, his own tranquility.”

Here the dynamic of interior listening takes on the character of caritas or love:

It will bring the silence of a lover listening with all his being to the heartbeats of his beloved. The silence of a bride, who in her utter joy listens to her heart reechoing every word of the beloved. The silence of a mother, so deep, so inward, that in it she listens with her whole being to the voice of her children playing in the nearby yard, cognizant without effort, of the slightest change in each voice. Hers is a listening silence which takes place while she competently, efficiently and lovingly attends to her daily duties.

One notes that it appears impossible for writers to speak about silence without using poetic language, for like God, silence remains always something slightly beyond our grasp. Yet silence, for Doherty, is not an end in itself. She joins Picard in saying that contemplation leads to word and action, for “speech will come more easily to people whose souls are completely recollected – in that silence – in the Lord. Speech and works too… there will always be time to do something more for someone, somewhere.”

In her book Molchanie (the Russian word for silence), Doherty writes that the arch of her spirituality can be traced in three of her other books: Poustinia, which we have just been citing, whose title refers to the ‘desert’ or place set apart for encountering God; Sobornost, the Russian term for a particular kind of ‘unity’ of heart and mind, in and

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93 Ibid., 22.
94 Ibid., 23.
95 Ibid., 24.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 25.
with God; and finally, *Strannik*, the Russian word for pilgrimage. She summarizes:

one goes first into the poustinia of the heart to allow God to cleanse oneself thoroughly, that is, to cleanse one’s soul of all that is not God, so that, purified, one becomes united with God, in sobornost. Then the Lord will tap one’s shoulder and say, “Now is the time to go on a pilgrimage, into the sea of silence.”

Doherty’s terms are similar to the three classical stages of the spiritual life in the Christian tradition – the purgative, unitive, and illuminative – and while it is beyond the scope of this thesis to enter this topic in depth, we note in passing von Balthasar’s qualifying advice that “we would be wise, therefore, to avoid setting up rigid laws regulating the sequence, the succession of contemplative states – laws which would in any case have only a very general application.” These are not necessarily chronological stages, but dynamic stages, and are possibly repeatable and overlapping in the individual as he or she grows in the spiritual life. Yet Doherty mentions uniquely the “sea of silence” as an end to the growth sequence. She identifies this sea with the world of the “heart” where one finds union with God. At the edge of the sea of silence we “listen” as:

Each wave says, ‘Come, come, come.’ And we have to go. Not because we are impelled by anything human. No, we are impelled by love, a love that knows no bounds. Even if our love is ‘bound,’ in a little while it will be like Christ’s – boundless. Like Christ, we will open our arms to embrace the whole world: all peoples and races, and even our enemies.

Again, Doherty has reaffirmed what she stated in *Poustinia*: that the human experience of silence is necessarily other-oriented, practically synonymous with Christian agape, and that it has a quality of limitlessness – it is all-embracing and therefore freeing. Finally, Doherty unites silence with the word, although for her it is the “logos” that speaks: “silence is more powerful than any words, except one: the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by entering into the Word that the gift of utter silence, and therefore of

101 Ibid., 9.
complete speech, is given to some." In the end, silence gives birth to the word, and the word gives birth to the silence. This is not a chronological sequence either, but an inner dynamic born from their mutual complementarity, their dwelling in union, each giving fecundity to the other.

If it is the fundamental nature of silence to be the ground of our speech and activity, then Doherty’s theological insights have given them spiritual depth. Balthasar adds a further profundity and a Trinitarian context. He reminds us that Christ is the pattern and archetype for the kind of life and destiny for which all human beings are destined, and this is revealed in both his person and mission:

Identity is only attained in that concrete Epitome of the order of salvation history called Jesus Christ, in whom we who have yet to be created have been ‘chosen’ and ‘predestined’ for our mission ‘before the foundations of the world’ (Eph 1:4). Furthermore, if this identity constitutes the ‘peak’ (Eph 1:10), of the whole creation, it is only possible on the basis of an (entirely different) distinction within the One who exhibits this identity, namely the distinction between the Son who eternally comes forth from the Father (processio) and the Son who is sent and goes forth into the world of time (missio).

In the latter identity, that of Christ sent into the world and modeling a way of relating to God and others for humanity, we see that God the Father is the ground of personal integration and identity. For “the more the Son unites himself with the Ground from which his person and mission simultaneously spring forth, the better he understands both his mission and himself.” So it is, we must conclude, for the human person who is united with God in the silence of his or her interior life.

To summarize, we have seen how silence is a ground from which our words and actions come forth, an interior state of active receptivity to the word of God, a place of encounter with God – the God of the prophets and of Jesus Christ, Son of God, and a state in which God the Father speaks to his children, and in doing so, grants them personal identity and mission, a mission to love. Our next step will be to see how the

104 Ibid., 15.
106 Ibid., 169.
experience of this silence will help reestablish the sense of the priority of “being” over “making/doing”, and thereby restore balance or integration in our lives with the technologies that normally tend to draw us away from the silence.
Chapter 3

Silence in the Realm of Human Being, Doing and Making

Christianity [is at its] centre concerned with grace – if that word is given its literal meaning. Grace simply means that the great things of our existing are given us, not made by us and finally not to be understood as arbitrary accidents. Our making takes place within an ultimate givenness.

– George Grant, “Two Theological Languages”

How might the phenomenon of silence apply to the human reality in a way that is positively transformative? The most basic aspects of our humanity are our being, our doing and our making. Technology and media affect all three and can either confuse or clarify their order or priority. As we have already seen, modern technology tends to emphasize the productivity of both the human person and our view of nature, and to obscure the apprehension and value of being. Seeing the entities of nature in isolation from the wider context of creation, largely as consumables and as mere aggregates of parts, has thus led to a fragmentation that needs restoration. In this chapter I will argue how silence, as we now understand it, is a means of this recovery.

The benefits of technology, particularly medicine, transportation, the Internet and communication, are manifold, and Catholic teaching has not ceased to marvel and praise these, and rejects any wholesale condemnation of technology in favour of some idealized Eden-like view of nature. The key, as has been already stated, is rather to maintain a

108 For example, Benedict XVI writes: “If on the one hand, some today would be inclined to entrust the entire process of development to technology, on the other hand we are witnessing an upsurge of ideologies that deny in toto the very value of development, viewing it as radically anti-human and merely a source of degradation. This leads to a rejection, not only of the distorted and
right relationship with our arts\textsuperscript{109} and technologies, and be aware of the fields of consciousness that they foster.

Ever since Aristotle, it has been axiomatic that “art imitates nature.”\textsuperscript{110} As makers we have been aware that what we do and make is within a larger order of creation. We are “co-creators”, made in the image and likeness of God, and thus our work within that order is participatory, helping nature actualize potentialities it could not realize by itself. The wooden stool in a kitchen, the ordered garden in the backyard, the metal eyeglasses – these are all examples of art perfecting nature. Seen in this way, art functions analogously to grace with regard to nature, and is ultimately an ennobling activity on our part, a constitutive aspect of what makes us more richly human. Modern technology, we have seen, tends to reverse this, threatening to reduce the human person to an image of his artifacts. This is what McLuhan meant when he said “we make our tools and then our tools make us” – always more-or-less true (a “hoe-based” agricultural society will be formed around the influence of the hoe), but with modern technology is pushed to an extreme and into a reversal. Our tools – the computer and its content – begin to determine how we live, work, and think to an often-overwhelming degree. We cease to remain “outside of” our technologies, as Ellul and Grant have argued, but become more and more their by-product, especially as they affect our consciousness. For instance, when we barely see the difference between human embryos and software packets or garden seedlings – easily manipulated and expendable – as human creatures we have become largely unintelligible to ourselves.

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\textsuperscript{109} “Art” here will have the classical meaning of \textit{making} or \textit{fabrication} in its most general and universal sense.

\textsuperscript{110} Aristotle, \textit{Physics} II.2, 194a23.

\footnotesize
As the term technology implies – téchnē and logos – the human way of doing and making is related to human knowing. Human art – and this includes science and technology – is necessary to our understanding of ourselves, for art and nature need one another. Michael Hanby has argued that the problem today is that art no longer imitates nature, but nature imitates art – that now, in principle, nature can be made and remade endlessly, without regard to any higher integrated vision of the universe.\textsuperscript{111} The root problem is ontological: we have forgotten, with Bacon, Descartes and Hobbes, that the universe has esse commune or being, and an ordered end to which it tends. We tend to seek knowledge by looking at parts, without regard for the integrity of the whole – a functionalizing of our relationship to nature and its objects.

After Aristotle, “the Christian discovery of esse and personal being deepened this [essential] interiority nearly to infinity, since the infinite God as the giver of esse was now more interior to the creature than it was to itself.”\textsuperscript{112} Aquinas’s description of esse, completum et simplex sed non subsistens\textsuperscript{113} helped retain the understanding of a universe that was a real unity without compromising the essential individuality of the substances that composed it – nor reducing them to mere parts. Bacon, however, would eliminate form, substance and finality, “refashioning the meaning of causality itself from a communication of form to a production of force or power, and radically transforming the meaning of dominion in both the natural and political spheres.”\textsuperscript{114} Being was no longer act, as a uni-verse formerly entailed – “a single order of reality wherein things are mutually implicated in each other’s existence by virtue of their act of being”\textsuperscript{115} – and all was reduced to mere facticity and historicity. Furthermore, as nature became artifice, an object of endless manipulability (given the success of the experimental sciences), our knowledge of nature became less a “know-what” and more a “know-how”; knowledge was reduced to engineering, and the creative or poetic dimension was largely excluded from the picture.

\textsuperscript{112} Hanby, 206.
\textsuperscript{113} Aquinas, De Potentia, I, 1, ad 1.
\textsuperscript{114} Hanby, 206.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
Silence is the natural atmosphere of perception and wonder. The classical way of *téchnê*, or making, began with a sense of wonder at the “beingness” of being and of its anterior order in the knowing process. There was a distinction between contemplation and practice, and practice was divided further into action (doing) and production (making). Ethics or morality governed action, while production was guided either by beauty (the fine arts) or utility. In the architecture of the Greeks and Romans, as well as the Medievals, there is a visible harmony between beauty and utility, a fruit of the regard held for both contemplation and practice – and in that order. In Roman bridges, for instance, there is a sense of “gestalt” or regard for the figure of the whole, something that is more than the sum of its parts. This results in a strongly unified entity, such that some of these bridges are still in use, whereas many of the engineering feats of the 1970s, based upon largely utilitarian principles, are crumbling today. Beauty as a transcendental part of being is present in all artifices to a greater or lesser extent, but, as Hanby notes, in modern art and architecture “the evacuation of being and of beauty’s objectivity brings about a divorce of beauty and utility to the detriment of both.” This is the result of the loss of contemplation from human consciousness, and something that silence can help us “see” again.

Another aspect is the consequent *drivenness* of technological society. Once nature has been reduced to artifice, and contemplation to action, society experiences “a relentless dynamism of interminal activity.” When the interiority of essential being – what the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins would call “inscape” – goes unrecognized, there are no limits to our capacity or need to manipulate the objects of nature. At the same time, when there is no higher end (or *telos*) in view, there are no limits to the same dynamism, which is why we tend to view technological development not as an ordained destiny but

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116 Descartes’ bracketing off of his senses exemplifies the rejection of wonder. Cf. Bacon’s remark that Renaissance man will “easily free himself from all wonder, and rather pity the human condition…” (Bacon, *The New Organon*, I., 85).
117 The consumer loyalty to Macintosh computers, and the almost religious response to the death of founder Steve Jobs is perhaps an indication of how powerful the human sense and need is for the aesthetic integration with the practical.
118 Hanby, 215.
119 Ibid., 216.
120 Hanby notes that without reverence for objects, we can only offer moral objections to certain practices, which can only appear as “moralistic” objections in our de-ontologized context.
as a deterministic fate. The Internet is a product of this sense of the determinism and relentless activity, and as a result, tends to be, for a great many, a subtle and even overt form of compulsion and bondage.

Authentic human téchne, or making, is related to human freedom, the freedom to contemplate. This does not mean that every worker needs be a philosopher-king, but, as Hanby remarks, “it must leave open the possibility that he could become a philosopher-plumber.” He cites Simone Weil’s observation that the fisherman, despite the regular cold, fatigue and lack of leisure, has a more enviable lot than the production line worker who is probably more “comfortable” in that regard, because the fisherman’s work more resembles that of the free man. There is a natural freedom associated with creative and practical thinking, being present with nature, and the general balance of one’s contemplative and active sides. Today, when the economy is less defined by the assembly line and more by the office cubicle, the fragmentation of the moral, spiritual and intellectual cosmos, the privatization of beauty, and the loss of contemplation are no less apparent. For the Christian, of course, there is always a way of practicing a “spirituality of work” regardless of where one labours, in which one can help others live holier lives and unite one’s sufferings to the Cross of Christ. But the separation of work in technological society from the order of nature has left a rift that only a recovery of active receptivity to the wholeness of being may provide.

This is where the experience of silence may enter as a corrective. All people to a certain extent recover their sense of wonder and awe when they leave the artificial metropolis and digital environment and experience nature while camping or canoeing, hiking or fishing. It doesn’t take long for the human person to be overwhelmed by the grandeur of creation, experience one’s creaturehood (possibly as vulnerability or smallness), the glory of nature (an aesthetic experience), and perhaps even something of the gratuitousness of being. Likewise on silent retreats or in other rare moments of solitude, this awareness, sometimes painfully but usually gainfully, begins its restoration. This view of wholeness is the beginning of recovery of one’s place in the cosmos, and of spiritual encounter with God.

121 Hanby, 221.
The Catholic tradition, with Aquinas in particular, holds that God did not create out of necessity or with any particular end.\textsuperscript{122} God is \textit{esse ipsum subsistens}, the fullness of being itself, and creates out of the superabundance of his goodness. The world and its inhabitants is therefore an end in itself (in the Genesis account, there is no mention of a “reason why” for creation, only that, at each stage, “God saw that it was good”). Creation is more of an ontological condition than simply a fixed event of the past, but remains the fundamental structure of the world at every moment of its existence. God’s goodness, which is presupposed by his generosity, results, at every moment, in the world. Hanby quotes Kenneth L. Schmitz’s insight that “creation is to be understood as the reception of a good not due in any way, so that there cannot be even a subject of that reception. It is absolute reception; there is not something which receives, but sheer receiving.”\textsuperscript{123} Thus creation and all creatures are ontologically contingent, our existence is purely gratuitous (i.e., given freely out of divine generosity), and purely receptive. Hanby goes on to say that “because I am sheer receiving, my being is marked from the very beginning and always by this prior receptivity, by being \textit{from}” – I come from something other than myself and my own potentiality – and “what I receive in receiving my being is act, agency, which is by definition self-communicating and causative, a being with and a being \textit{for}.”\textsuperscript{124} This state of being is common to everything in nature, and may be called, as we have mentioned, \textit{esse commune}. But at the same time, every individual being or \textit{ens} is a “concrete universal,” existing according to a universal form, yet truly new in itself, and irreducible to anything else: “Every child awakens for the first time in Eden.”\textsuperscript{125} This “being for”, then, is why the most appropriate existential disposition of the creature is that of praise and gratitude.\textsuperscript{126} For the Christian there is a particular vocation to discovering and highlighting the being of the world. Von Balthasar, writing in his \textit{Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics}, believed that:

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\textsuperscript{122} Aquinas, \textit{Summa Theologica} I, q. 44, a.4.
\textsuperscript{123} Hanby, 225, quoting Kenneth Schmitz, \textit{The Gift: Creation} (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), 32.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ignatius of Loyola’s “Principle and Foundation”, the basis of his spirituality, is that “man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.” (\textit{The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius}, 23).
\end{flushright}
Christians of today...are given a task of performing the act of affirming Being, unperturbed by the darkness and the distortion, in a way that is vicarious and representative for all humanity: an act which is at first theological, but which contains within itself the whole dimension of the metaphysical act of the affirmation of Being. Those who are directed in this way to pray continually, to find God in all things and to glorify him are able to do so on particular grounds (that is particular graces) which allow them to perform their “creaturely duty”... But in so far as they are to shine “like the stars in the sky”, they are also entrusted with the task of bringing light to those areas of Being which are in darkness so that its primal light may shine anew not only upon them but also upon the whole world; for it is only in this light that man can walk in accordance with what he is truly called to be.127

It is important to address a point concerning God as the origin of all being. Joseph Ratzinger has written that “no one can understand the world at all, no one can live his life rightly, so long as the question about the Divinity remains unanswered. Indeed, the very heart of the great cultures is that they interpret the world by setting in order their relation to the Divinity.”128 Hitherto, we have been using Aquinas’s notion of God as a sheer act of Being, in order to account for the gratuitousness of the created order. In the Old Testament, God self-identifies as “I AM who AM”, while in the New Testament, John writes in his first letter that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). This raises the question as to which has priority in God: his being or goodness. The question might seem like hair-splitting, but it is significant since, as Jean-Luc Marion holds, when we use the more abstract notion of being to define God we risk committing intellectual idolatry.129 Marion fears we might exhaust our “gaze” in conceiving God as pure being, instead of holding God as the God of love as revealed in Jesus Christ. Following Dionysius and Bonaventure, Marion believes that the identification of God as good (the giver) is the more properly iconic representation. Yet Aquinas appears to have been aware of the danger of the various potentials for intellectual idolatry and the theologian Robert Barron

129 Marion was an early student of the eminent Thomist Etienne Gilson, who himself argued that the metaphysics of Exodus (“I AM who AM”) established God as the sheer act of existing. Marion later held that “God is love” ought to be the primary designation. See Jean-Luc Marion, God Without Being (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).
comes to his defense, arguing simply that “to be sure, divine giving is ontologically prior to creaturely being, but what is it that enables God to give if not the divine being? Even the Platonic light gives light because it first is light.” Furthermore, Barron argues, being and good must be together as one in God, since his giving is predicated upon the uniqueness of his being as Giver. The two qualities coexist in God in a kind of “circumsession,” for in God, to be is to give. This is more fully revealed in Christ as the Trinitarian dynamic of mutual self-gift: the self-emptying and receptivity of the three Persons. As von Balthasar has written, “Being itself here unveils its final countenance, which for us receives the names of Trinitarian love; only with this final mystery does light fall at last on that other mystery: why there is Being at all and why it enters our horizon as light and truth and goodness and beauty.”

This question of God’s Being concerns the human person, because it serves to underscore the gratuitousness of our own being, as well as the vocation to imitate the self-emptying and receptive God. Thus, to have knowledge of the world means to acknowledge the priority of being (the being of the world) in light of God, an act which is prior to all our thinking and subsequent action; “my every action is therefore preceded ontologically, if not temporally, by an act of contemplative receptivity.” In other words, our most basic creaturely action is to be receptive to the world as it exists, and to the God who created it.

We can never withdraw ourselves from this act, but we can pretend that it does not exist. We can diminish our conscious receptivity by a sort of constant activism, by seeing every object in reference only to personal needs (as consumables) — whether egotistical, material or electronic — or simply by means of sensual distraction and diversion. The

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131 Ibid., 238.
133 Hanby, 227.
134 One might mention the obvious escapist function that digital media performs. In addition to being a virtually limitless portal of information and entertainment at any and all times, sites like Second Life offer a virtual world for the user to inhabit. It is not the purpose of this study to critique the Internet’s content, but let us note in passing that according to analyses such as the 2010 Optenet study, 37% of the total content of the Internet is pornography, while online role-playing games (RPGs) grew by 212% in the first three months of that year (see the study at http://www.optenet.com/en-us/new.asp?id=270. Accessed April 28, 2012). Second Life has
experience of silence as active – meaning *attentive* – receptivity to being will help restore
the proper order of perception. It will enable the perception of the *gestalt* of the
object/situation, seeing first the “right” of the object to exist in its own objectivity and
givenness, and then how the subject should order its relationship to it according to proper
ends. Like von Balthasar we would avoid the kind of subjectivism that devalues the
“radiance” of objects as gifts, and embrace one that perceives the inner form of the
objects of our contemplation. The practice of silence will focus the human
consciousness by calming it of its often superficial stimulations, and permitting the figure
or form of both subject and object to appear more clearly in their integral wholeness,
allowing for the establishment of an ordered (and properly receptive) relationship
between them. As a subject, the human person will first acknowledge his own
contingency, appreciate the mystery and dignity of his own being, and then naturally, the
mystery and dignity of other beings and objects. The subject will gradually acknowledge
other persons and objects as fitting into the paradigm of creaturehood that is ordered to
the good.

It should be apparent at this point that the ultimate end (telos) of the human subject is that
of existing more fully in the dynamic of giving and receiving, of self-gift and receptivity
of the gift of the other; in short, the human person is called to love. Gabriel Marcel wrote:
“In the long run all that is not done through Love and for Love must invariably end by

135 Louis Dupré writes “von Balthasar unambiguously repudiates the “impressionist” subjectivism
of an aesthetics based more on the harmonious relation which the human subject establishes
toward the form’s intrinsic quality of radiance. For him, as for the Greek Fathers (and, indeed, for
Plotinus), the light of beauty breaks forth from the form itself, not from the subject’s perception
136 Ignatius of Loyola follows his “Principle and Foundation” with the teaching that “other things
on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is
created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end,
and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.” (*Spiritual Exercises*,
23).
being done against Love. The human being who denies his nature as a created being ends up claiming for himself attributes which are a sort of caricature of those that belong to the Uncreated.”

Hence, what begins as a philosophy of being, ends as a philosophy of love. In the final analysis, this criterion is the ultimate measure of the right presence and use of electronic and digital media in one’s life.

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Chapter 4

Practical Considerations for the Individual and the Church

By the way, faith is not a matter of concepts: it’s percepts, a matter of immediate reality.
– Marshall McLuhan

What are some possible tools, then, for balancing sense stimuli with silence, and for acquiring and maintaining the proper use of our digital tools? How might we begin to integrate silence into our daily lives, in order to become people of right discernment? In light of the analysis undertaken in this study, two main applications emerge: criteria for the human individual and criteria for the Church. In this chapter we will examine some practical means and submit some modest recommendations.

1 Discernment for the Individual

The most basic response, given what we have discussed in this paper, would be the intentional and conscientious decision to maintain in one’s daily life regular periods of silence, which might involve prayer, reading, or simple outdoor activities such as contemplative walks. As Catherine Doherty tells us, living in a city or contexts where there is much human noise need not detract from the experience and sustaining of inner silence. Yet everybody yearns for actual silence, and people often find themselves unable to make the commitment or achieve the balance – such is the force of technology to command our attention and use of time. Unplugging, both literally and mentally, is an essential activity in the digital age if word and silence are to be kept in balance.

To be more intentional, consistent and successful in our efforts, it is essential therefore that we become increasingly media literate – not only with the content, the more common concern (and an important one), but with the media as media. One place to begin would be the formation of a theoretical and critical apparatus for appraising media – especially new media – both culturally and in our own personal lives. Marshall McLuhan helps
I believe, by providing an interpretive paradigm for such appraisals, which remains unsurpassed since it first appeared in two posthumous books *The Laws of Media* and *The Global Village*. In brief, McLuhan proposes a *tetrads* or four-fold way of questioning a medium, that reflects laws he believed are inherent in the evolution of media itself. These can help give us context for the decisions we make. The four questions are:

1. What does the medium enhance?
2. What does the medium make obsolete?
3. What does the medium retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?
4. What does the medium flip into when pushed to extremes?

Taking radio as an example, one might make the following analysis: As an answer to question one, radio enhances (amplifies or intensifies) news and music by means of sound. Answering question two, radio obsolesces, or drives out of prominence (since previously dominant media usually remain around after their replacement’s arrival) the importance of print and the visual. Newspapers cease being the dominant form of media when everyone has a radio in their home, workplace and vehicle. The third question, what does the medium retrieve, is the restoration of the spoken word to the forefront of human communication. The answer to the fourth question, what does radio “flip into” when pushed to its limits, is television, which is both audio and visual. To take another example, the cellular phone enhances interpersonal communication, accessibility and response time, obsolesces phone booths, privacy and the isolation of the home, retrieves tribal culture, acoustic space and cameras in public space, and when pushed to extreme becomes omnipresence and etherealization of human presence (“the sender is sent”).

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138 The work of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), the celebrated English literature and communications professor based at the University of Toronto in the 1960s and 70s, gave often obtuse and aphoristic insights into the nature of media, and commanded the attention of the public for decades; it continues to be studied and discussed today (See http://marshallmcluhan.com).
McLuhan’s tetrad permits us to examine the “grammar and syntax” of the language of media, and observe many of its more subtle effects. The content of every medium is a former medium, for example. This is no more apparent than with the Internet, a convergence of print, radio, television, and recorded music and films – all of its predecessors. Even before the digital age, the “content” of the printing press was the hand-written manuscript, just as the content of the manuscript had been the oral account. McLuhan also reminds us that every medium extends or amplifies some organ of the user. Clothes extend skin, television extends eye, phones extend voice and ear, etc. Yet because there is an equilibrium in what he terms our “sensorium” or the span of human sensation, when one area is enhanced, another one is diminished. Using these four questions, the individual can become more critically aware of what effect a new device such as a iPod or smart-phone, a Wii or SPS will have in one’s life or the life of one’s family (enhancing, obsolescing, retrieving and possibly reversing).

Given the concerns of Heidegger, Ellul, and Grant outlined in the first chapter, what might help us counter the more troublesome effects of media on our consciousness, our separation from incarnate reality and our tendency to commodify nature? The German-American philosopher Albert Borgmann, professor at the University of Montana and author of several books on the effects of electronic media and culture, rejects both technological determinism, the view that technology is a irresistible force that forces our hand as we shape our culture, and technological instrumentalism, which sees technology as a mere collective of neutral processes and structures that can be used either well or badly. Like McLuhan, Borgmann is aware that the medium “is” the message, is formative in and of itself, and bears critical analysis and understanding. For example, he writes:

Using or not using the interstate highway system is not a matter of choice anymore for most of us, and neither are the moral consequences of long commutes and the neglect of family, neighborhood, and inner city. When we finally come home, late and exhausted, greeted by a well-stocked refrigerator, a preternaturally efficient microwave, and diverting television, there is little

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choice when we fail to cook a good meal and summon the family to the dinner table.\textsuperscript{142}

Borgmann is concerned – like Hanby – that human work today is often unfulfilling and our leisure is not ennobling, and that at a deep level, the culture knows this and is profoundly uneasy. We continuously compensate for this unease by using more and more technologies. He calls this state of increasing reliance on technological conveniences \textit{device paradigm}, the cluster of technological phenomena that include “the cultural displacements, the commodification and mechanization, and their embedding in contemporary culture.”\textsuperscript{143} As an illustration of life in device paradigm: we no longer need to wait until evening and gather in the living room, local pub or town square in order to share entertaining stories. It is now available from the comfort of our couches, at will and at any time. This convenience (television) is a good example and representation of the \textit{basic premise} of technology: the expectation of ever-greater liberty and prosperity. As Borgmann writes, “the promise of technology is one of material and social liberty, the promise of disburdenment from the pains and limits of things and the claims and foibles of humans.”\textsuperscript{144} Thus the process remains essentially in “opposition” to incarnate reality and human sociability, even as it fosters the simulation of greater “connectedness”.

Yet there are counter-practices to device paradigm that are still alive and well in our culture, above all the practice of reading, which still makes profound impressions. Literacy, while in continuous struggle with its more titillating competitors of the digital realm, remains an important means of recollection, silence and even wisdom. Why is reading so important to our minds and souls? Borgmann analyses what occurs when we read:

The answer is that literacy on the part of the reader generates the wealth of information a viewer receives without charge. Literacy is a many-storied skill,

\textsuperscript{142} Albert Borgmann, \textit{Power Failure: the Place of Christianity in the Culture of Technology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 122-23.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 121. Borgmann states boldly his belief that the most constructive benefits of modern technology took place in the first half of its development, a period roughly from 1850 to 1950, but that since then “the layer of doubt and sorrow has grown, and the benefits of technology have become thinner.” (Borgmann, \textit{Power Failure}, 122).
rising from word-recognition via parsing to comprehension. To read comprehendingly is to follow the author’s instruction in the construction of an imaginary world. The author gives us the blueprint, but we must supply the materials and situate the structure. The materials are our experiences as well as our aspirations... The location of the structure is somewhere in the life of our imagination, that realm of pregnant possibility that surrounds and informs our actual life. Thus to read is to gather our past and illuminate our present. It is a focal activity that collects our world as a convex lens does and radiates back into our world as does a concave mirror.\footnote{Borgmann, \textit{Power Failure}, 124.}

When reading this statement, one is struck by how much reading is essentially a contemplative pursuit, an act (like prayer) that exemplifies “active receptivity” while engaging the deeper dimensions of the intellect and soul. Reading has perhaps a certain pride of place, but is nonetheless just one of a multiplicity of human activities that Borgmann terms \textit{focal things or practices}\footnote{Borgmann elsewhere defines these as the following: “A focal thing is something that has a commanding presence, engages your body and mind, and engages you with others. Focal things and the kinds of engagements they foster have the power to center your life, and to arrange all other things around this center in an orderly way because you know what’s important and what’s not. A focal practice results from committed engagement with the focal thing.” From Albert Borgmann, “Prime Time: Albert Borgmann on Taming Technology,” Interview by David Wood, \textit{Christian Century} (2003): 22-25.} – that can help us resist becoming pell-mell denizens of device paradigm. Focal things and practices are the human activities that make life meaningful. Focal things include good books, musical instruments, athletic equipment, good art, and the objects of nature. They can be correlated to focal practices such as reading, reciting poetry, playing instruments, dining, walking, sporting activities, painting, sculpting, fishing, gardening, rock collecting, and so on. They might be characterized as the activities that engage our better sides: our creativity, ingenuity and sociability, and are re-creative even as they require investment. When magnified in scale, they are also the basis of all communal celebration. “Community,” wrote Borgmann in another book, “gathers around reality.”\footnote{Albert Borgmann, \textit{Crossing the Postmodern Divide} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 136.} While the pattern of the device paradigm has become dominant, it is by no means the exclusive force in culture: “in most cases consumption of commodities and engagement in focal practices are found in one and the
same life. But they cannot substitute for one another, and if one expands, the other must shrink.”148

Device paradigm vs. focal things and practices is therefore a powerful analytic for balancing technology in our lives. Evidently, Borgmann is not anti-technology, but as a philosopher of technology he holds that the major benefits are largely recognized, but that we must also pay attention to the cultural and human liabilities and losses. Not all conveniences are healthy, and certain focal practices, ostensibly burdensome, should not be blithely abandoned without reflection:

Consider, for instance, the burden of preparing a meal and getting everyone to show up at the table and sit down. Or the burden of reading poetry to one another or going for a walk after dinner. Or the burden of letter-writing – gathering our thoughts, setting them down in a way that will be remembered and cherished and perhaps passed on to our grandchildren. These are the activities that have been obliterated by the readily available entertainment offered by TV. 149

That the more “incarnational” focal activities usually require greater investment of effort than their electronic replacements is axiomatic – at least something every parent will readily observe. It’s far easier to let children turn on the television, gaming console or otherwise “plug-in”, than it is to get them to settle into a book, draw pictures, play board games or playact in imaginative games. The large amount of time that can pass in the virtual world is also a phenomenon noticeable by anyone who has engaged it, as well as the resulting phenomenon of listlessness, boredom and irritability after these activities are finished. This is in direct contrast to the general consolation and vitality that usually results from focal practices. There is an investment of effort, however, that needs to be made in the focal practice – the acquiring of envelope and stamp and composition of pen on paper – that is often a deterrent. Yet that added organizational or willed effort is often proportionate to the payoff – the pleasure that the letter recipient feels. Low threshold, low rewards; greater threshold, greater rewards.

148 Borgmann, _Power Failure_, 125.
149 Borgmann, “Taming Technology”, 22.
Borgmann identifies a key characteristic of focal practices, however, when he notes that “the burdensome part of these activities is actually just the task of getting across a threshold of effort. As soon as you have crossed the threshold, the burden disappears.”

Once we are already writing the letter, cooking the meal, dining together at table, walking in the outdoors, reading the poem, playing the piano, or doing one’s morning meditation, the burden has lifted and the deeper sense of satisfaction usually has arisen. After an initial cross comes a grace of resurrection. There is a purposeful, even contemplative quality to these activities as opposed to the more frenetic and multitasking spirit of practices such as emailing and other electronic activities. Focal practices require either actual silence or an open disposition to achieving an inner silence. In order for them to prosper and compete with device paradigm temptations, it is important that one loves the focal practice, so it not simply become driven out of guilt or mere necessity. This love, along with the healthy habits it conveys, will be transmitted to one’s children either in the present or future.

2 Discernment for the Church

The Church has as its most fundamental mission the sanctification of her members and the proclamation of the word of God. This kergymatic mission to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15) is a mission of communication. By it, Christians are sent forth to share the word of God with others. Thus the question of the environments and consciousness fostered by digital technology concerns, for the Church, this mission in particular: how do they affect both proclamation and reception of the word?

One-time student of McLuhan, the Jesuit communications scholar Walter Ong believed that human communication was ultimately different from what the model implied by the

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150 Ibid.
151 Walter Ong (1912-2003) wrote ten major works and countless articles on orality and literacy in human history and culture. His master’s degree on sprung rhythm in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins was supervised by the young Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan at St. Louis University in 1941. After completing his doctorate at Harvard, Ong returned to St. Louis and taught there for more than thirty years. His international honours were many, and to date, his
term “media” described, as if communication were a pipeline that transfers bits of material called information from point A to B. Rather, Ong noted, when human communication occurs, there is always an anticipated feedback from the listener. “To speak,” he wrote in *Orality and Literacy*, “you have to address another or others…I have to be somehow already in communication with the mind I am to address before I start speaking.”152 We need to know something of the mind we are attempting to address, which is why we never speak to different people (e.g., an adult and a child) in exactly the same way. In other words, communication is never uni-directional, but *intersubjective*, fashioned in both form and content by an “anticipated response.” The written word, on the other hand, is more one-way, although the writer’s art is to imagine his potential, though presently absent, audience. We are born into orality, which “first illuminates consciousness with articulate languages, that first divides subject and predicate and then relates them to one another, and that ties human beings to one another in society.”153 Writing, on the other hand, introduces “division and alienation” but also reflection and self-consciousness or consciousness-raising.

Given this orality-literacy polarity, it becomes a rather urgent theological question as to what exactly constitutes the word of God. Broadly considered, the “word” for theologian Bernard Lonergan referred to *any expression of religious meaning or value*, as found in relationships between people, in art, symbol, language or as seen in human lives (although he admits a certain privilege to the spoken and written word). For Balthasar, the word is always none other than Christ himself, which when encountered, gives rise to the gift of faith, hope and love. For both theologians, encounter with the word is related to an “experience of the holy,” encounter with the *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, and becomes “knowledge born of religious love.”154

Ong notes in his detailed study *The Presence of the Word* that there are various layers or senses to the word/Word in the Hebrew and Christian tradition. The word is something

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153 Ibid., 179.
from God that is efficacious (e.g. Creation); it is also a communication from God to man, either privately or through the prophets; God’s word is also his communication to the writers of Sacred Scripture through inspiration; the word is also the text of the Bible itself; finally, the Word is Jesus Christ, who as Second Person of the Trinity is the “Word made Flesh.” While the Word Incarnate is visible (i.e. sensible/manifest), according to Ong – as for the aforementioned theologians – there is a special relationship with sound: that which appears is the Word of Life (I John 1:1): “The Christian hierophany is in this sense oral-aural,” writes Ong. “For if God manifests or shows himself here in the Word (as there is of course ample scriptural warrant for the believer to say he does), he more fundamentally communicates himself. Communication peaks in sound.”

Thus when Jesus speaks in the Gospels, it is the words of the Word:

the sayings of Jesus, themselves become the core of the good news, the Gospel, part of the Bible – which is as a whole the word of God already. Acceptance of God’s kingdom, which these sayings of Jesus announce, is dependent upon hearing, directly or indirectly: “Fides ex auditu” – Faith comes through hearing – Paul declares (Rom 10:17).

This may be the most important consideration for the Church when she embarks on her multi-platform mission of evangelization. Does our use of media remember that the encounter with the mystery of God’s word necessitates an act of listening? If our presentations are too “noisy” or multi-sensory then perhaps we risk obscuring the word itself. Given the culture’s excess of noise, perhaps what the Church needs most is a greater counter-cultural witness of what one might term the sacrament of silence. Ong himself suggests this when he considers that “there has perhaps never been an asceticism…which has not made much of silence as a way of life and a mode of communication and presence.”

Like Benedict and Picard, the Jesuit scholar of human

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156 Ibid., 187.
158 Ong, The Presence of the Word, 188.
communication observed that “sound and silence define each other... for sound itself is defective in accomplishing its own aims. Silence makes up for what sound lacks.”

Benedict XVI has suggested, in his 2010 Message for World Communications Day, that “God’s loving care for all people in Christ must be expressed in the digital world not simply as an artifact from the past, or a learned theory, but as something concrete, present and engaging.” The digital world ought not be reduced to a mere mouthpiece or vehicle for the proclamation of the word, but a place where spiritual encounter and transformation can take place. The Pope went on to advise that “our pastoral presence in that world must thus serve to show our contemporaries, especially the many people in our day who experience uncertainty and confusion, ‘that God is near; that in Christ we all belong to one another.’” Do men and women of the Church effect that encounter in the digital realm remains an open question. Some video blogs, such as Fr. Robert Barron’s popular “Word on Fire,” have shown how pastoral voices in the blogosphere can be instructive and attractive – and arguably an example of successful transition from both oral and literate forms of communication to the electronic.

As for making space on the Internet for “God and his nearness,” good examples are less easy to come by. In any case, it seems advisable that the Church not only consider its presence in the digital realm but rededicate itself to the incarnate dimension of its worship, the power of its sacramentalism, which itself is based upon the inherent goodness of creation, relates to

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159 Ibid., 187-88.
161 For a chronicle and study of successful uses of new media in ecclesial settings, see Brandon Vogt, The Church and New Media (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011). I am grateful for Vogt for gathering these testimonies, and for his many positive insights and suggestions.
162 One spiritual use of the Internet is the website “Sacred Space,” an initiative of the Irish Jesuits. With a large international following, the site invites the user – in one of twenty different languages – to “make a sacred space in their day” by praying with sacred scripture in silence for ten minutes. See http://sacredspace.ie (accessed May 13, 2012). For an interesting non-religious attempt at introducing the experience of silence online, see www.thequietplaceproject.com (accessed May 13, 2012).
163 Here I am using this term to refer to the emphasis placed on the importance of sacramental objects and ritual actions.
the God who is “in all things” (Ignatius of Loyola), and above all, the Word that became flesh.

In some ways, the electrification of our churches has caused the diminishment of the sacramental sense. In a provocative essay entitled “Liturgy and the Microphone”, McLuhan argued that the introduction of the microphone in Mass was the key cause of the move from Latin to vernacular and ad orientam to ad populum positions in liturgical practice during the 1960s (“the vernacular is strongly horizontal in its thrust and embrace, whereas Latin tended to the vertical…”164), radically changing the dominant form of perception and environment. What the microphone inadvertently caused was a sudden flip from primarily visual to auditory experience in the liturgical context. One negative result has been that “acoustic amplification overloads our auditory sensory channel, diminishing the attention span of the visual and private experience of the liturgy, as well as of the architectural space, isolating the individual in a kind of ‘sound bubble.’”165

While this may have superficially assisted the aim of the Second Vatican Council of encouraging full and active participation in the liturgy (as opposed to an isolated “private experience”), one may also conjecture whether the loss of silence and meditative space in the liturgy has also meant a loss of receptivity to the word.166 The Church can only benefit by paying closer attention to its use of electrical amplification in its liturgies not because the visual nature of sacramental liturgy needs to dominate the auditory, but precisely because the auditory has a priority but requires the psychic distance provided by the strong visual context of a sacramental setting.167

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165 Ibid., 113.
166 McLuhan wrote that “the meditative individual in his ‘sound bubble’ is naturally irritated by the strident and amplified vernacular voice of the celebrant.” (Ibid., 114). McLuhan had already noted the increased interest in Eastern Christianity around the time of the liturgical reforms after the Council. In an interview he once said “It would be a good time to be Russian Orthodox: they split off from Rome because it was too literate. The Eastern Church is an ‘ear’ Church; Rome was always very far along the visual road to visual power.” (Marshall McLuhan, “Futurechurch: Edwar Wakin interviews Marshall McLuhan”, U.S. Catholic, vol. 42, no. 1, January 1977, 6-11).
167 All this is to suggest that electronic media in liturgical contexts do more than just enhance, but also transforms the experience of the participants, as well as the environments in which they take place. The microphone, to further illustrate the point, tends also to create a performer-audience dynamic, reducing overall the sense of sacred space and sacred time in ritual worship.
The most common concerns with today’s hyper-connected world can also be the basis for the Church’s response. If a major concern is the shallow relationships that social networking and texting are forming, the Church, still an “expert in humanity”, can help people return to the art of meaningful conversation and relationships. This can be done through the original social network: the parish. Youth groups, prayer groups and faith-sharing groups, outreach ministries that aim at fulfilling the ageless call to “spiritual and corporal works of mercy,” foster this communal aspect to the Church as Body of Christ. The Church should also be the strongest voice encouraging people to turn-off their devices and pursue focal practices in their daily lives, to exhort families, for example, to unplug and honour as sacrosanct the ritual of the family meal. If another concern is information overload and chronic mental fatigue, the Church must renew its invitation of all to come to Jesus who will give his rest and peace (Matt 11:28). Observing a Sabbath rest from digitalia is one way, as well as regular digital fasting. Most of our overload comes not from authentic work but from the urge to fill our minds with endless facts or visuals, and like excess in food, drink or cigarettes, it will never satisfy. Tied to this is the respite fasting provides from the steady temptation to online vanity, the narcissism and pride that Facebook, Twitter and their like encourage through their format of measuring “success” in terms of how many “friends”, visits, hits, and comments one has. Serving the poor is excellent medicine, as well as a rediscovery of the “little way” spiritualities of saints like Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Catherine Doherty. A strong Marian dimension in one’s personal, family and parish spiritual life will also guarantee that humility will never be relegated to the realm of wistful thinking. Finally, the epidemic difficulty in prayer and the loss of contemplation can be remedied by a renewed effort at instructing believers in classic methods of prayer, as well as providing the space and means – for example, Adoration chapels and Eucharistic worship (both personal and communal), not to mention affordable annual retreats and preached parish missions. Priests, religious and lay men and women might consider dedicating a greater

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168 The rise of the practice and popularity of Eucharistic adoration in the Catholic Church correlative with the increase of intensity in digital environments is a topic for another study. Exploration of the theme of finding God in contemporary media culture, however, has begun to emerge with books like Matt Swaim, *Prayer in the Digital Age* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 2011).
portion of their ministries to leading people to God through the experience of silent prayer and meditation. Like the crowds who chanted “we want God” over and over during John Paul II’s historic visit to Poland in 1979, the people of God today desire to know their creator despite the totalitarian structures of a certain digital technopoly.
Conclusion

In this study we have argued that media technology is not an unnatural force in human life, nor the object of an irresistible determinism that withstands any and all limits. At the same time we have resisted the tendency to instrumentalism, or viewing technology as basically neutral, good or ill only according to its use or misuse, for we have seen how certain devices command by their very presence in communal or individual life a predominance and eclipse of other practices that enrich our basic humanity. While the concerns of Heidegger, Ellul, Grant, Postman and McLuhan have a gravity that has only increased with the development of the Internet and the environments it produces, various experiences of the phenomenon of silence can help rebalance our communicative relationship with each other (through a better equilibrium of word and silence), with nature (reality over virtual reality), and with God (through opening our inner lives to the possibility of hearing his Word). Right relationship to media technology flows from this, as an inner attitude characterized by an “active receptivity” to the unveiled essence or form of objects in the world. This awareness brings with itself an ordering principle, which can be sustained in everyday life. It is an attitude characterized by fundamental openness to the gratuity of reality – the givenness of created being – and to the Trinitarian God from whom creation ebbs and flows. When we can recover this awareness, we are honouring the priority of being over producing, which is ultimately an act of “praise, reverence and service” to the God who Is.

The implications of this are manifold for both the individual and the Church. There is, above all, an urgent need to find ways of integrating silence into one’s life on a regular – daily, weekly and even yearly – basis. McLuhan’s tetrad and Borgmann’s analytic of device paradigm vs. focal practices helps us engage this process of discernment. These require of us an initial investment and appreciation of silence, lead us to the integration of word and silence, and of the devices and focal things that we seek. In the end, this balancing act is but the attempt to integrate all one’s thoughts and actions with the love for which we are destined. Unless this end is understood and “obeyed,” then finding and
keeping a deep human freedom will be difficult if not impossible. Virtual reality provides a certain simulation of relief from the vicissitudes of real life and other persons that is too compelling, providing even, as McLuhan held, a “reasonable facsimile of the mystical body.” The role that receptivity to being plays is essential here – to being as manifest in the real world of objects and immediate human relationships. Silence thus has both the quality of a means and, in a certain sense, an end, at least as an interior state.

There are many directions in which future research could carry this line of inquiry. From within the span of McLuhanesque theory, one could approach the question of right relationship with technology from the perspective of a figure/ground analytic, then relate this once more to questions of liturgy and evangelization. Likewise McLuhan’s celebrated although debated distinction between hot and cold media and how this distinction relates to media use in both human formation and Gospel proclamation. Epistemologically, there is room for exploring what is the difference between concept and percept, and how devices and environments affect these modes of human knowing. Further, both Balthasar and McLuhan have noted that the ultimate union of medium and message occurs in the person of Jesus Christ. There has been very little exploration, to my knowledge, of the implications of this central (at once theological and philosophical) phenomenon applied to other areas of human experience. What might be the effect, for example, of a Christological analysis of our use of digital media: how do they “speak” by both their form and content – is there a greater or lesser unity when the medium is more or less the message – media as martyrological entities. Finally, if the phenomenon alternately known as modern technology, technique, or device paradigm is a product of Western civilization, what role might particular Western traditions of silence and contemplation, e.g., Carmelite, Ignatian, Cistercian – or specific practices like lectio

170 McLuhan made a distinction between concept and percept in human understanding, holding that concepts are static, repetitive, detached and self-enveloping, while percepts function via the sensory world, are participatory, instantaneous and involving. For more, see “Basic McLuhan: Marshall McLuhan and the Senses,” http://gingkopress.com/02-mcl/z_mcluhan-and-the-senses.html (accessed May 14, 2012).
divina – play, and by what dynamic paths, in the recovery of an ordered relationship between person and artifice.

Appropriating silence is not easy for the human person. “I have often said,” wrote Pascal, “that the sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”\textsuperscript{171} For someone accustomed to mathematical and philosophical precision, this was an incisive diagnosis of the restlessness of the modern age. But as we have seen in this study, it also suggests a stabilizing antidote. Prayer and study – two classical aspects of the act of \textit{contemplatio} – are always within reach, if we but dare to surmount the threshold of silence. Under silence’s mantle, we will remember many things half-forgotten, see truths anew, and come to hear the Word that speaks from the beginning of all time. The Word beckons us into depth upon depth, and offers us ever-expanding vistas of new life, and a final communion of being that is at once receptivity and self-giving, worship and rest.

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{Pensées}, no. 136.
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