Davis, Lennard J. (1995). Deafness and insight: The deafened moment as a critical modality. College English, 57(8), pp. 881-900. doi: 10.2307/378619

Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modality

Lennard J. Davis

Now the Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence. And though admittedly such a thing has never happened, still it is conceivable that someone might possibly have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.

Kafka, *Parables*

In the age of multiculturalism, class consciousness, feminism, and queer studies, the Deaf and people with disabilities remain relegated to the margins. About 42 million Americans, or about 15 percent of the population, are people with disabilities, making them arguably the largest minority group in America. About 10 percent of the population is estimated to have a hearing loss. Nevertheless, disability has been undertheorized—a remarkable fact for this day when smoking, eating a peach, or using a bodily orifice is hypertheorized. As a result, the general population does not understand the political connection between disability and the status quo the way many people now understand the connection between race and gender and contemporary structures of power.

It is true that the term "disabled" is not a very good one. The term "differently abled" has recently been used, but everyone, not just those paraplegics or autistics, is differently abled. Many prefer "person with disabilities" to "disabled person"; the former implies a quality added to someone's personhood, whereas the latter reduces the person to the disability. I use "disabled person" when I am talking about the object created by ableist society. These terms are all hopelessly embroiled in the politics of disability, or ability if you like, and so are basically not usable. Given that caveat, I do nevertheless use the term "disability" since it seems to be one that most people with disabilities use.

The Deaf, however, argue that deafness is not a disability. They now see themselves as a linguistic subgroup like Latinos or Koreans. The Deaf feel that their culture, language, and community constitute a totally adequate, self-enclosed, and

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self-defining sub-nationality within the larger structure of the audist state. (On the model of terms like "racist" and "sexist," "audist" labels the hearing establishment's bias toward the auditory mode of communication.) The Deaf do not regard their absence of hearing as a disability, any more than a Spanish-speaking person would regard the inability to speak English as a disability. Indeed, as Nora Ellen Groce pointed out, a bilingual deaf/hearing community on Martha's Vineyard existed for many years with no "handicap" for Deaf citizens since almost all discourse could be conducted in sign language when necessary. Since most culturally Deaf people are reared in the Deaf community, go to the same residential schools, speak the same language, and participate in the same culture, they see themselves as different from other people with disabilities who, unless they take steps to become politically organized, are often isolated with their particular disability. Further, the Deaf do not see their linguistic status as linked to, say, mental retardation or schizophrenia. They see their state of being as defined not medically but socially and politically.

In discussing the double-sided nature of disability, I need to add a further qualification. Many people who are not impaired in the usual sense of the word still consider themselves to be part of the disabled community. I was born into a family with Deaf parents. My first "word" was uttered in sign language. The word was "milk," a sign I made through the slats of my crib. I grew up in a Deaf world, in a Deaf culture, and with a Deaf sensibility. So in that sense, I am not deaf (hearing impaired) but I am Deaf (culturally Deaf). I am what is now referred to as a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults), and as such I consider myself similar to people who have grown up in a bi-cultural family. My claim of authority to write on this subject is based partly on that in-between position I occupied and still occupy.

In thinking about literature, "normal" people have tended to create categories of expressivity which are seen as universal and to use key words of literary analysis like "silence," "speaking," "voice," "mute," "dumb." More often than not, representatives of marginalized discourses will speak of being "silenced" or of being empowered to "speak" or "give voice." These statements place a negative connotation on the non-normatively linguistic and a positive spin on speech and vocalization. In other words, ableist concepts permeate the literary/critical lexicon. What I want to propose is that disability, deafness in this case, can be seen as an avenue into a theoretical discourse rather than either the infirmity that blocks communication or a subject for a simple thematic exposition as one would find in an analysis of "deafness in literature."

I am proposing to look at deafness as a critical modality. Here one wants to distinguish among the Deaf, the deaf, and the deafened moment. The Deaf are that community of deaf people who share language, cultural values, history, and social life. The deaf are simply those who do not hear. But the deafened moment is one that does not rely on either the Deaf or the deaf, although it exists in a dynamic relationship with the Deaf. I am speaking (writing) of the deafened moment as a con-

textual position, a dialectical moment in the reading/critical process that is defined by the acknowledgment on the part of the reader/writer/critic that he or she is engaged in an activity that does not involve speaking or hearing. Reading and writing have for the most part been unproblematically—and undialectically—thought of as processes that involve hearing and vocalizing. But, as Theodor Adorno points out, "the less the dialectical method can today presuppose the Hegelian identity of subject and object, the more it is obliged to be mindful of the duality of the [various dialectical] moments" (*Prisms* 33). Since we can no longer assume an identity between reader and text (or reader and reader), we must then pay more attention to the duality of the deaf and hearing moments. In this case, the deafened moment, long suppressed, must now see (signify) the light of day. When we illuminate (write) this moment, we acknowledge the political oppression involved in denying that the way we discuss reading and writing has in fact implied the ostracism of those who are differently abled linguistically. Further, we highlight the buried assumptions of the process of reading/writing.

I will be looking at (writing about) the deafened moment as it dialectically approaches the critic, the reader, and the text. Each of these three entities has a deafened moment that has been historically suppressed.

DEAFNESS AND THE CRITIC

In *Blindness and Insight*, Paul de Man made the point that "critics' moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also the moments in which those critics achieve their greatest insight" (109). In making this connection between criticism and the body, de Man spun out a metaphoric relation between sight and insight. In so doing, he follows a long tradition of somatizing moral and ethical issues. Tiresias, Oedipus, and King Lear all experience blindness as an ultimately enabling affliction that leads to insightful recognition. Martha Edwards points out that in ancient Greek texts "there are literally thousands of references to the most common term for blindness in the literary material, [but] there are only a few hundred instances of the common term for deafness." Edwards draws the conclusion that in the ancient world "blind people—at least in literature—were beloved, even revered. There is no literary equivalent for deaf people, who were considered slow at best, sub-human at worst" (1).

Despite the well-worn connection between blindness and insight, de Man nevertheless manages to use blindness as a metaphor for intellectual denseness that then is transcended by insight, saying that critics who are "blind" are "deluded" (104), "within error" (103), "mistaken" (110), or "aberrant" (111). Thus, while endorsing the cultural continuity that sees blindness as leading to inner vision, de Man nevertheless also supports the notion that blindness is a metaphor for unwillingness or inability to investigate a point or idea. Thus blindness is only partially enabling.

Why should blindness be so foregrounded? Perhaps the simplest answer is that blindness implies sight as its opposite, and reading ordinarily requires sight. But, as Jacques Derrida points out in his essay on Rousseau in *De la grammatologie*, Western civilization has privileged the oral form of discourse as the essence of language, writing being only a trace of the spoken word. Thus the essential form of critical insight, according to that logic, should be deafness, not blindness. Blindness only puts a bar between the reader and the text. But deafness seems to place a barrier between the subject and language as it is privileged by Western culture—that is, oral language.

This discussion may alert us to the audist assumptions that readers tend to make about texts. The conflict may not be between conceptions of language as oral and written. Rather, the assumptions of Western culture may be related to the originary point of language—the mouth or the hand—and the receptive point of language—the ear or the eye. The mouth is hypostatized as the font of poetic language, oratory, conversation, while the hand is made special as the locus for writing, scholarship, the essay. Similarly, the ear is considered the receptive site of music, of speech, of language—while the eye is the receiver of the artistic, of written knowledge. To a large extent, an economy of the body is involved in our own metaphors about language and knowledge. Blindness, insight, enlightenment, illumination, darkness, obscurity—these terms constitute a system of metaphors supporting the illusion of the ideal body. When the tables are turned and conversation is received through the eye and generated by the hand, as is the case in sign language, most people assume we are no longer dealing with language as such.

Derrida in *Marges de la philosophie* ends up privileging the ear as the means of receiving knowledge by metaphorizing the eardrum as a term in a philosophical process (i–xxv). Although Derrida may want to break with Western prejudice, it is ironic that he ultimately ends up making a binary distinction between forms of language seen as normative, rather than locations of language as produced by various parts of the body.

Even Derrida's assumption presumes that if a norm is not followed, then what follows cannot be normative behavior. So certain modalities of language are defined as normative, and eccentric occurrences do not seem to be part of language—language being seen as only either of the voice or of writing. An analogy might be to say that sex is defined as only that which is associated with the penis or the vagina, and anything else is not normal sex, therefore not sex. We may recognize the falsity of that argument, but still cling to notions of a normative linguistic modality.

This bias goes so far as to postulate a binarism of "sight" and insight. If insight is gained, as de Man claims, by the moment of critical blindness, a deconstructive somatizing of a critical aporia, then what would be the equivalent term in an equation in which deafness replaces blindness? "Invoice" or "inhearing" does not quite

seem right. We might try deafness and "communication" or deafness and "knowledge," but these pairs fail to clinch the voice in language as insight clinches the lost sight in blindness. A better way of thinking this problem through is to place deafness next to "textuality." I suggest this move since, if blindness is opposed to, yet leads to, insight, what deafness is thought to be opposed to is language, but this analogy leads us ultimately to the text in its most general form—the text of language.

As de Man notes, speech in Rousseau and in Western civilization in general is conceptualized as presence, while writing is thought of as absence or negativity. Thus, if we speak of a critic being blinded, using the hegemonic terms of Western civilization, we are saying the critic is cut off from culture, from discourse, from representation, and from the technology of writing, printing, reading; thus the blinded critic is severed from the world of system, logocentrism, phallocentrism. Insight, in these terms, would be reintegration into that system, perhaps in a new or reordered way, but still nevertheless into that system—which is the system of symbolic production.

On the other hand, if we say that the critic is deafened, if we highlight the critical moment of deafness, we imply that the critic is severed, not from the world of the symbolic, the systematic, but from the experiential, from the body. Thus the "context" gained from the return from critical deafness would be a re-connection or a reconfiguration with the body (seen not as a primal ground of resistance but as itself part of a chain of signification), with immanence, with the contingent.

Up to this point, I have been exploring the implications of deafness versus blindness, using the categories of speech versus writing. These categories are not self-evident, but they are in effect enforced by mechanisms of cultural production. Derrida and de Man claim that Western civilization privileges speech over writing. I am not assuming that their position is true or false, at this point, but exploring the possibilities for criticism if these categories are seen as merely normative. In so doing, nevertheless, I am attempting to show that even given this false dichotomy, it would be counter-hegemonic to argue for deafness rather than blindness as a critical modality. The metaphor of blindness, only too happily used in the Western tradition as a metaphor for insight, serves to reinscribe the critic into the normalizing systematic, whereas deafness has the potential to reassign the critic away from the cultural construction of system to a more transgressive role, toward the imperative of Cixous and Trinh to "write through the body."

Another reason for a preference, at least strategically, for deafness over blindness, is, as I have indicated, that deafness itself has been a more excluded term than blindness. The blindness/insight paradigm is a well-established part of the meaning system. Deafness has been so excluded precisely because it seems to be outside of meaning. Blind people are never considered outside of language, as deaf people conventionally are. A nineteenth-century director and physician of the Institution

for the Blind in Paris, Dr. Guillée, encouraged the point of view that the deaf were worse off than the blind:

> an insurmountable barrier separates [the deaf] from the rest of men; they are alone in the midst of us, unless we know that artificial language [sign language]. . . . More favored than these melancholy children of silence, the blind enjoy all the means of conversation with other men; no obstacle hinders them from hearing or being heard, since the ear, which has been so philosophically defined as the vestibule of the soul, is always open for them. (qtd. Kitto 179–80)

This common view of deafness only emphasizes the exclusion and marginalization of the deaf. And the difficulty in finding a parallel term, in the deaf track, for "insight" only confirms this point.

In putting the point in this way, I hope I am not understood to be making an actual judgment on the merits or demerits of blindness over deafness. People who are blind and people who are deaf are physical minorities, and not many people would dare to judge which ability is the more enabling. Rather, in this essay, I am speaking about the cultural resonances of such disabilities as they appear in metaphors about the process of knowing, as moments in an epistemological dialectic. In this case, I am saying that blindness turns out to be a loaded metaphor for the critic because it implies that texts are visual phenomena, that they are inseparable from their typographical incarnation. Further, for complex reasons, blindness has been adopted by Western culture as a metaphor for insight, while deafness has been a signifier for the absence of language. I seek to redress this banishment of deafness by inscribing it into the critical syntax.

DEAFNESS AND THE READER

What is the deafened moment in the text? Here, I move from considering the critic as the site of investigation to considering the text and the reader. The blind moment arrives with the inability not only to decipher a readable, scriptable object (with its attendant graphic presentation, typography, verticality, horizontality, and visual encoding) but also to consume the cultural product, the circulating, technological commodity with exchange and use value—the text. The deafened moment, on the other hand, overtly presents itself as the inability to follow the text's sonic presence, silence, duration in time, breath, voice, and ideologically ratified forms of conversation (that is, oral exchange of semantic units). The blind moment, then, overtly seems to bar technology in the modern sense of "textuality," and the deafened moment overtly bars the sonic residues of the body moving through time, bars narrative as defined in an oral/aural culture. In this sense, deafness is set up in opposition to the oral culture of pre-eighteenth century Europe, and blindness would appear to create an opposition to print culture. Given these alignments, it makes sense that Homer's putative blindness is linked inextricably to the narrative tradi-

tion. Homer, in the largest onomastic sense, signifies a bardic tradition, often of blind, wandering poets. The point is that the blindness is no bar to creating oral narrative, but it is hard to imagine Homer the deaf and mute bard.

What I am saying is that certain senses, or the lack of certain senses, may in fact characterize certain periods of human development. Walter Ong postulates the existence of four such periods: oral, script, print, and electronic. Donald M. Lowe in his *History of Bourgeois Perception* uses these categories to propose

> that the communications media in each period, whether oral, chirographic [hand-written], typographic, or electronic, emphasize different senses or combinations of them, to support different hierarchical organization of sensing. And change in the culture of communications media ultimately leads to change in the hierarchy of sensing. (7)

For Lowe, "in an oral culture, hearing surpasses seeing as the most important of the five senses" (7). And even in the thousand-year period between the invention of writing and the advent of print, "chirography never succeeded in overcoming the oral connection between the speaker and the content of knowledge" (6). Only the widespread dispersion of print led to a change in the hierarchy of senses, and sight became paramount. Martin Jay makes a similar point in his *Downcast Eyes.*

The novel and print technology permitted the deaf, for the first time, to be part of the collective narrative tradition, thus reversing the overt interpretation of deafness. The first published works by deaf people appeared in the eighteenth century. The "deaf" Duncan Campbell was one of the first characters to appear in the work of that quite early novelist Daniel Defoe. Defoe's protagonists all explore aspects of society by occupying the place of the other—a man deprived of all society, a criminal, a prostitute, and logically then a deaf man. Through the deaf man, Defoe can explore the very textuality that permits him to exist as a writer. In the eighteenth century deafness was first constructed as a disability (Davis 50–72), in fact as the primary disability, and institutions developed rapidly at the end of that century to "teach" the deaf. This I see as the construction of deafness as the "other" of print culture.

DEAFNESS AND THE TEXT: AN EXCURSION INTO THE HEART OF SILENCE

One way to understand this difference of deafness is to examine the role of silence in narrative. If one can think of a text as a kind of palimpsest of both the visual and the aural, then the textual equivalent of silence is blankness or empty space. There is a difference between the blank text and the silent text that is indicative of the difference between orality and writing. Western culture is organized to discourage silence (Jaworski 7). Silence is the repressed other of speech. A brief scan of the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals the metaphorical use of "silence" to stand for

death, night, or nature. Silence is seen as unmediated absence in its global form, and in its particular form it is a break in narrative, a rupture of words, a pause or hesitation. For example, at the end of James Joyce's short story "A Painful Case," the main character experiences an existential silence that indicates the absence of God or any form of meaning:

> He could hear nothing: the night was perfectly silent. He listened again: perfectly silent. He felt that he was alone. (117)

Joyce uses silence as a proleptic signal of the end of the narrative. The silence is both the immanence of nothingness and the immanent end of the short story. Silence equals death, absence, meaninglessness. Silence becomes the modernist's answer to words, to narrativity.

Likewise, in Joseph Conrad's work, silence is always seen as the border of language. In "Youth," the narrator's version of Marlow's oral storytelling ultimately ends up confronting the silence of "the East," described as "silent like death" (38). Coming ashore, Marlow "faced the silence of the East . . . the silence was as complete as though it had never been broken" and he saw "beings [who] stared without a murmur, without a sigh" (40); "the East looked on [his sleeping companions] without a sound" (41). In essence, the East is a sonic heart of darkness. But Africa too is silent. In "An Outpost of Progress," the terrain is seen as "dumb solitude" (107) and "the great silence of the surrounding wilderness . . .[seemed] to draw them gently, to look upon them, to envelop them with a solicitude irresistible, familiar, and disgusting" (108). This silence is the opposite of Marlow's loquaciousness and the text's attempt to put impressions into words. Silence is the location of the mysterious, colonized other, bereft of language and therefore of humanity.

Generally, silence is to be avoided at all costs, unless particular events demand it. For example, an audience must remain silent so that actors can speak or musicians can play. Silence has to be created by rules, by force, or by agreement. As some linguists have put it: "it only takes one person to produce speech, but it requires the cooperation of all to produce silence" (Pittinger et al. 88). Almost all the examples of *silence* as a verb in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are of a ruling male silencing subordinates. Silence is the strongest enforced form of the Name of the Father because the silence represents the space that permits the Name of the Father only and no other name. The response to God is reverential silence. The name and the law produce a human silence, enforce a silence. Silence is either punitive or transgressive. We say that people who are silent are unfriendly, hostile, or passively aggressive, although silence can signal intimacy, but only because intimacy removes the public ban on silence.

Silence is golden because of its transgressive nature. The story of King Midas recalls this conjunction. In the familiar story, Midas was granted the wish that

everything he touched would turn to gold, but unfortunately his food, his home, and his daughter were all so transmuted. The silence of gold is in fact the silence of death, of the body turned to object. The tension among the power to rule, the creation of wealth, and the rule of golden silence becomes clearer. By turning his daughter to gold, Midas transforms the feminine into a silent object of male desire. The silence is enforced by wealth and position. The continuation of the story is also linked to silence. Midas, dissenting from the river-god Tmolus's decision to award Apollo the highest prize in a musical contest, was punished by having his ears turned into those of an ass. His barber, or in another version of the story his wife, discovered the shameful secret that Midas wished to conceal and was sworn to silence. Unable to bear the enforced silence, the barber (or the wife) dug a hole and whispered into it "King Midas has ass's ears!" Then the hole was filled up, but a reed sprouted from the hole and whispered the secret to all who passed. Midas's ears call attention to the issue of sound, as does the musical contest. Midas turns the shame of his ears into the silence enforced on his wife (or his barber), who violates the Name of the Father by speaking, unable to maintain silence. The silence he wishes has the aim of erasing the narrative, the story of the King's ears. Power wishes to eliminate transgressive, non-approved narration, but nature, in the form of the reed, maintains a *basso continuo* of sound, of story. The narrative Midas wishes to suppress is one about the body. Just as his wish for golden silence suppresses the body—the instincts—his wish for narrative silence stills the flow of plots, of explanations, of digressions about the body—his body.

Another parallel to the Midas story in Greek myth is the story of Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens. Here Odysseus exempts his own body from the rule enforcing silence that he imposes on his men: he orders them to block their ears with wax so that they will not hear the luring song of the Sirens. As King, he has the power to enforce silence. Adorno and Horkheimer in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* see this myth as one that foretells the wish of the Enlightenment to suppress the senses in service of production, and I think we can add to that reading by seeing the role of enforced silence or deafness as, again, a form of cutting off the body from the flow of narrative. Odysseus's story of the Sirens will be complete because of his political power, while he is able to enforce his masculine will on the men to deprive them of the erotic allure of the Sirens. Here, too, deafness and silence bar the men from the body, and the insight attained by the return from deafness connects Odysseus himself back to the body.

In this sense, silence is of the body. It is an immanent state of the body in which the body can be present, but verbal communication is absent. This is why Cixous can write that "women must write though their bodies . . . get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence' " (342). Silence is located at the intersection of the instincts—sex, vi-

olence, bodily functions can occur in silence. But the spatial concept of emptiness bans the body; and the body bans emptiness. By definition, there cannot be an empty space if a body is present, even a dead one.

Empty space tends toward being an absolute negativity. It is not possible to have a little emptiness. Silence, however, is local, it is particular, not systematic or totalizing. A short silence can follow a long bout of sound. Thus silence is intermittent, never permanent. But a little emptiness cannot follow presence.

What does this distinction between emptiness and silence mean for narrative? Narrative in some sense is constructed to avoid silence, yet silence is an intimate part of narrative. George Steiner has shown that silence is a logical consequence of poetry, a way of transcending the word. Poets like Hölderlin and Rimbaud, rather than ending their careers by silence, complete them: "Hölderlin's silence has been read not as a negation of his poetry but as, in some sense, its unfolding and its sovereign logic" (Steiner 47). In an oral conversation, people can fall silent, although usually they do not do so for long. In a printed text, silence can only be indicated by language. One can say, "They fell silent." Paradoxically, in sign language, as in written or printed text, there is no silence. There can be stillness in sign language; in print there can be blank space, or one can insert an ellipsis to indicate a momentary lapse in expression. Ironies abound here. First, most written and printed texts are read in silence, at least since the end of the Middle Ages. So print narratives are actually surrounded by silence. Second, within a text, a "silence" is made possible only by the noise of language. To make a true silence, one would have to present an emptiness—as Laurence Sterne does in *Tristram Shandy* when he "prints" a blank page. Yet that blank page shows us in extreme form the inherent prejudice that print is a sighted medium, that what we are getting in print is a verification that our cultural model has become one in which print replaces, stands in for, displaces orality. Sterne's silence is spatial, typographic—not based on the presence or absence of sound.

DEAFNESS IN THE TEXT

When I say (write) that the social practices of reading and writing naturalize the visual nature of print, I am saying that from the eighteenth century onward, the reading public has increasingly valorized sight over hearing. This valorization in effect stands on its head the traditional notions that blindness leads to insight and deafness leads to an absence of language. In the new world of print and reading, the deaf can read texts, while the blind (before the wide promulgation of Braille, or more recently computer scanners) cannot. Relatively suddenly, the whole metaphorics of the body has to be rearranged. In this new world, the cultural icon for the reader of print culture becomes the deaf person. The deaf person becomes the reader incarnate.

Yet there was a deeply ambivalent attitude toward the Deaf. By the nineteenth century, as Douglas Baynton's work has shown, the Deaf began to be perceived as foreign, alien, other. If nations needed to neutralize the deaf, the literature of particular nations further carries out this function by creating within texts representations of deafness that serve an ostracizing function. Just as sighted people may feel some hesitation in communicating with the blind, hearing people are often intimidated by speaking with the deaf. While, on the one hand, the deaf person might stand for the ideal reader, on the other, deafness retains its traditional sense of absence of language. The point here is that when deafness is hypostatized as a textual phenomenon, as a cultural area of inquiry and exhibition, it can be regarded as a part of the process of textuality. But when a deaf person appears in literature, the deafness no longer functions in this theoretical and abstract way. Now deafness reverts to its old sense of absence of language. And since language is seen as human, as "us," the deaf are seen as "not us." For this reason deafness is often portrayed comically in literature and drama, especially if the deaf character is incidental to the story line. The deaf character is the butt of many "eh-what??" jokes. For example, the loquacious Miss Bates in Austen's *Emma* is paired with her deaf mother; both are objects of derision, as when Miss Bates explains

> My mother's deafness is very trifling you see—just nothing at all. By only raising my voice, and saying anything two or three times over, she is sure to hear; but then she is used to my voice. (125)

Of course she is, as are we. And of course, when Miss Bates is insulted at Box Hill, it is her loquaciousness that Emma finds offensive. Miss Bates's response is "Ah!—well—to be sure. Yes, I see what she means, (turning to Mr. Knightly,) and I will try to hold my tongue" (294). Loquaciousness needs to be tempered with dumbness; just as loquaciousness is often paired with deafness, as in the old saying attributed to Coleridge, among others: "The most happy marriage I can picture or imagine to myself would be the union of a deaf man to a blind woman." As Peter Stallybrass points out, in the Renaissance silence was enforced on women by men who fear their production of speech. "Silence," he notes, "the closed mouth, is made a sign of chastity. And silence and chastity are, in turn, homologous to woman's enclosure within the house" (127).

Both garrulousness and deafness are linked threats to novelistic language, to patriarchal structures; as such they must be ridiculed. The loquacious female pops up throughout literature: we have Midas's wife, Juliet's nurse, Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Flora in *Little Dorrit*, Dora in *David Copperfield*, the Woman of Shamlegh in *Kim*, and the Granny in D. H. Lawrence's *The Virgin and the Gipsy*. The last is an illustration that even age does not dull loquaciousness. Lawrence writes, "she was hibernating in her oldness, her agedness. But in a minute her mouth would open, her mind would flicker awake, and with her insatiable greed for life, other

people's life, she would start on her quest for every detail. She was like the old toad . . ." (29–30). The voracious sexual mouth becomes the voracious speaking mouth, transformed by negative gender implications into a toad snatching flies.

Both the deaf person and the loquacious woman violate the rules of "speech" in the novel. One violates through silence, the other by verbosity—in either case, proper language is sabotaged. Dickens sees Flora's speech as "running on with astonishing speed, and pointing her conversation with nothing but commas, and very few of them" (*Little Dorrit* 161). She violates the grammar of written language, but she also violates the norms of conversation. In this transgression, she represents the danger that language can become gibberish, a stream of schizophrenic associations like those that make up Lucky's discourse in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.* For authors, both the silence of the text and its pure verbiage must be repressed through ostracism, through a ridiculing of the inability to "hear" the novel's dialogue—through the deafened moment. This ostracism coincides with women's subjection since, as Jane Gallop says, "in the ideology of our culture women are objects described, not speaking subjects" (71). Deafness, in effect, is a reminder of the "hearingness" of narrative. It is the aporetic black hole that leads to a new kind of deconstruction of narrativity. In Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame of Paris,* Quasimodo is the deaf, lame, half-blind hunchback, whose body, signified as grotesque, is a reference to the implied grotesqueness of his deafness. He is paired with the gypsy Esmeralda, the foreign female marked as the erotic subject. Both block or challenge the narrative in a very concrete way. As the novel opens, a crowd is expectantly awaiting the performance of a mystery play written by Pierre Gringoire. The play is upstaged first by a leprous beggar who distracts the crowd, then by the arrival of dignitaries, then by Quasimodo's grotesque appearance in a gurning contest, and finally by the crowd running off to see the gypsy dancing girl. The play is never performed, stopped in its conventional tracks by the metaphoric appearance of class, disease, deafness, and gender.

Quasimodo himself is constructed as having many disabilities. He is not a person *with* disabilities; rather he is the icon of the disabled person. But his deafness is made to be his "worst" impairment:

> "Alas!" he said, as if doubtful whether to finish, "it's because I'm deaf."
>
> "Poor man!" exclaimed the gypsy, with an expression of kindly compassion.
>
> He began to smile ruefully. "You think that's the last straw, don't you? Yes, I'm deaf. That's the way I'm made. It's truly horrible, isn't it?" (368)

Quasimodo's body, his ugliness, is a physical mark of his deafness, which finally makes him ultimately Other. When he is born, two nuns look at his physical features and decide that he is "an animal fathered by a Jew on a sow" (156). What could be worse than this metonymic miscegenation crossing all boundaries and violating all taboos?

MUTENESS IN THE TEXT: A RETURN TO SILENCE

For the writer, garrulousness and silence both empty meaning from language. Meaning is the surplus value of the text's production; or, in another modality, meaning is the symptom of the neurosis of textuality. Loquaciousness and silence reveal the symptomatic nature of meaning and therefore are constant reminders of the deconstructive threat hovering around the text. Loquaciousness, in an overdetermined way, also represents the transgressive sublimation of female power. If women could legitimately give voice to their complaints, they would not need the subaltern tactics of unruly domestic linguistic infringement.

As a form, the novel mediates between silence and sound. Novels begin not with words but with silence. Silence precedes the text and supersedes the text. The text is wrapped in silence. The first words of the text are there to break the silence. "I am born." "It is a truth universally acknowledged . . ." "Call me Ishmael." "Riverrun . . ." "*Longtemps je me suis couché* . . ." "In the beginning . . ." All these initiate by postulating an earlier silence and then introjecting that silence into the beginning words. The words begin the narrative, but the words defer to the earlier silence. The text itself is neither silent nor auditory. It is a phantasm of sound, an insubstantial echo. It is a go-between linking the silence that surrounds it to the auditory world. Writers write in silence; readers read in silence. What they write and read they hallucinate into sound. But the sound is a silent sound. The zen riddle about textuality would be: what is the sound of one person reading?

Silence is in the text. It is between words, and in some sense, it accounts for meaning; it frames articulation. On an auditory level, each utterance erupts from silence. On a graphic level, those silences are represented by space, the space between letters and between words. Here the palimpsest of space and silence comes together in the interstices of textual language.

I have to point out my own bad faith up to this point. I have perhaps tricked the reader into assuming that deafness is silence, that not to hear is to be in silence. I have done this on purpose so that you might assume what the hearing world assumes. But this is an audist assumption because deafness is not at all silent—deaf people experience life filled with speech. But what they speak is sign language.

Sign language occupies the interstice where space and silence come together; sign language is the locus where the body meets language. Like the novel, mediator between the two worlds, the language of the deaf mediates between speech and silence. However, the novel mediates by feint, by creating the illusion of materiality, by diegesis. The novel relies on naturalizing effects to make words seem to be things, characters, places, by appearing to point, to indicate direction and place. Sign language, however, is not a feint but a bodily presence. The materiality of the sign is there in the sense that it is made by using the body's gestural repertoire. Unlike Pound's insistence that Chinese words were actually pictures of things—a fail-

ure to understand how signs become arbitrary, even if they are mimetic—sign language is composed not of graphic traces but of movement of the body through space. Language in general works by pointing to a deferred bodily presence. When Keats writes, "This living hand, now warm and capable" and says, "see here it is—I hold it towards you," he is using writing to indicate a deferred bodily presence. But signing the same poem would have a completely different effect. The hand would not be indicated but would be part of the signifying mechanism.

Another distinction needs to be made. The word "silence" can define at least two states. First it is the absence of sound; second it is the absence of voice. In the first, a space can be silent, as in "the silence of night" or "the silence of nature." The second, however, indicates that a person either does not or cannot make sound. The first is related to deafness, the second to "dumbness." The Deaf have always resented the term "dumb" because of its double connotation of "mute" and "stupid." In fact, the double meaning of the word reveals the audist bias that to be without spoken language is to be without intelligence, like a "dumb" animal. In reality, when audist culture speaks of someone who is "deaf and dumb," it is confusing two issues—the reception of signs and the production of signs. Since it is assumed that the dominant sign production will be *oral* and sign reception will be *aural* (though ironically only in writing, not in speech, can these two terms be distinguished), then the deaf are seen as bereft of language, hence of humanity. The term "animal" or "animalistic" is frequently used to indicate a life without spoken language. But if sign production is seen as written or printed, and if sign reception is seen as reading or signing, then the deaf are fully capable of fitting into that world. (Historically, the profession for which the deaf were prepared in residential schools was printing, particularly typesetting, a profession for which they were believed to be especially suited. Currently, computer programming is seen as a fit profession for the deaf. These are jobs in which signs can be produced without reference to the sense of hearing. The irony is that the printing trade employed the very icon of its own being.)

Like deafness, dumbness represents a threat to language. Deafness may be a constant reminder to writers of the aporetic silence kept at bay by narrative; dumbness serves to remind us all that spoken language is in fact an arbitrary form of communication. A chance of evolution has given the majority this particular means of expression. Carol Padden and Tom Humphries point out in *Deaf in America* that "sound" is "an organization of meaning around a variation in the physical world" (92). Douglas C. Baynton adds to this point, saying: "To be deaf is *not* to not hear for most profoundly deaf people, but a social relation. . . . What the deaf person sees in these other [hearing and deaf] people is not the presence or absence of hearing, not their soundfulness or their silence, but their mode of communication—they sign, or they move their lips" (226). Baynton adds the philosophically interesting point that silence is a meaningless concept to anyone who is born deaf.

Silence is a relational concept, not an absolute category. Consequently, dumbness reveals the arbitrariness of voice communication.

In the animal kingdom, sound is not the main form of communication but rather it augments gesture, as when a growl accompanies aggressive body posture. Like animals, human beings employ gesture in a rather profound sense. We know, for example, that body language is still the main form of communication between humans, with 90 percent of our attention paid to the non-verbal part of face-to-face discourse (Meyrowitz 103). Writing depends upon the chance, and then enforced, relation between orality and script. Writing that aimed to transcribe the grammar of gesture would indeed be quite different from standard written language. Dumbness is a living reminder of the arbitrariness and the materiality of the sign.

Worse, dumbness is the nightmare of the writer; it is the succubus that drains the writer's words from the body. Dumbness disables the writer. By a false chain of metonymy, the writing process comes to reside in the throat and mouth. Here the words are generated, and poets are said to sing, as in "Sing in me, muse" or "Arms and the man I sing." The nightingale, traditional symbol of the poet, derives its symbolic place from the story of Philomel, who was raped by Tereus. Attracted by her beautiful voice, he subsequently cut out her tongue to prevent her telling anyone about his crime. But she revealed his guilt by weaving the tale into a tapestry. The gods changed Philomel into the nightingale, symbol of poetry. The story is worth analysis because of the way it connects poetry, dumbness, and writing. Philomel's beautiful voice is paired with her subsequent disability. The silencing is a graphic representation of disability, rape, disfigurement of the female by the dominant male. Her dumbness forces her to write in the feminine mode of weaving; Helen, Persephone, and the Fates likewise "write" in tapestry. Writing becomes the inscription on the female body, as a just counter to the right of the male ruler to mark the bride's body as his through an exercise of sexual domination. The recourse to feminized writing is seen as a logical continuation of Philomel's dumbness, or as a counter to it. Thus, poetry issues from the throat of the nightingale—the repressed Other of dumbness.

In the Pentateuch, Moses, while not dumb, has a speech impediment; he says: "I am not eloquent . . . but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4:10). Because his dysfunction prevents him from speaking in public, his brother Aaron must be his spokesperson. Moses, the law-giver, is paradoxically dumb, and must be paired with his "normal," speaking brother. The law must then be written, inscribed in stone, as the word of the Father. In both these cases, there is a seemingly logical movement from blocked speech to writing. But the notion of silence and dumbness here becomes more complex because Moses is not allowed to say the name of God or to write it. Jewish practice forbids the naming of Yahweh, and so at the center of the tale of Moses receiving the Law is the aporia of the unnamed

name—the deafened moment that gives meaning to the written law. Hesitant speech becomes speech with a built-in hesitation, and so Moses's dumbness becomes representative of the injunction against speaking the name of God.

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia, Titus's daughter, is raped and has her hands cut off and her tongue cut out. Her rapists do this to prevent her from communicating their deed, saying

> So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
> Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee. . . .
> Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
> An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe. (II,iv,1–4)

Her body, like Philomel's, is both sexually violated and made dumb, doubly so because she is deprived not only of speech, but of writing. Like Philomel's voice, her lost speech is equated with singing and birds, in effect poetry:

> O, that delightful engine of her thoughts
> That bid them with such pleasing eloquence
> Is torn from forth that pretty hollow cage,
> Where like a sweet melodious bird it sung
> Sweet varied notes, enchanting every ear. (III,i,82–86)

Shakespeare, as the bard who sings "with such pleasing eloquence" himself, has Lavinia stand for the repressed aporia—speechlessness and the inability to write. Yet he treats her as a signifying force because the supposed absence of signifying must be kept at bay. So when Titus sees her, he allows her features to signify, saying "Thou map of woe, that thus does talk in signs" (III,ii,12). Titus considers the possibility that he and his family might

> . . . bite our tongues, and in dumb shows
> Pass the remainder of our hateful days. (III,i,131–32)

And we may recall here that in *Hamlet*, the "dumb show" that precedes the play-within-a-play signals a kind of purely gestural theater that, while possible, is antithetical to Shakespeare's own theatrical form. Lavinia's dumbness inevitably progresses away from silence to signifying, as when Titus says "I can interpret all her martyred signs" (III,ii,36). As if the pure uninterpretability of Lavinia were too much of a negation, Shakespeare nudges her dumbness toward language. Titus says that he will interpret her gestures so that

> . . . I of these will wrest an alphabet
> And by still practice learn to know thy meaning. (III,ii,43–45)

The almost violent necessity to "wrest" an alphabet out of dumbness demonstrates the vigor with which Shakespeare must banish the non-being of non-language.

This move toward the alphabet and writing is dramatized further when Lavinia is asked to name her assailants. She finally manages to signify by grunts and facial expression that she wants them to look at Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, and calls attention, with her stumps, to none other than the story of Philomel and Tereus. Having made her auditors understand through reading the story in the book what happened to her, she then writes the names of her assailants in the sand with a staff held in her mouth and guided by her stumps. The move from dumbness to gesture, then to writing and books seems inevitable, since the gaping emptiness of dumbness and the disfigurement of her writing hands is too much of a nightmare to signification. Shakespeare will not, cannot, allow dumbness to remain in its primary form as a sign of zero-degree significance, and writing wins out. Tellingly, Shakespeare seems to involve himself with a pun. Lavinia writes with a staff in the sand: here is the oft-noted shaky-spear or false staff, a private reference to the writer himself, feminized and writing in the symbolic shifting sands. Shakespeare creates a visual trajectory from the mouth to the pen as Lavinia clutches the former in the latter; and perhaps this is then the trajectory formed when Prospero breaks his staff in what many consider Shakespeare's farewell to writing in *The Tempest:*

> . . . I'll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fadoms in the earth,
> And deeper than did ever plummet sound
> I'll drown my book. (V,i,56–59)

Shakespeare connects the staff and the book and separates these unequivocally from sound. Thus he breaks the flow from sound to pen to book, resisting the imperative that powers writing in his work. But such a disjunction is also the end of writing—so unimaginable is it to think of writing as separated from sound. It has become a kind of critical cliché to talk about how various forms of ideological control have "silenced" minorities. Particularly in the case of women, the silence of power has been enforced. In looking at the archetypes of Philomel and Lavinia, it is possible to see a larger archetype. These women are literally silenced through mutilation by male power. The silence of the dumb is doubled by the gender issues, since the women are both silenced as women and marginalized as incapable of speech. This action is all the more pertinent because both women threatened to speak too much—to become the male's nightmare/joke of the loquacious woman. These birds threaten to sing, and so they are caged in silence. Likewise, the "deaf and dumb" person stands in as a silenced, feminized reminder of the power relations in an audist discourse.

If dumbness cannot be tolerated in writing, gesture seems to be the next step away from the nothingness of non-speech. Gesture was historically thought of as the forerunner of speech. Thus, some authors, rather than ban gesture, include it in their texts as a form of exorcism by inclusion of this repressed other of writing.

Often, one will see novelists replace language with gesture, as Dickens does in *Great Expectations* when Pip is taken home by Wemmick to meet the Aged Parent, whose deafness is a bar to communication. Pip is told: "Nod away at him, Mr. Pip; that's what he likes. Nod away at him, if you please, like winking" (230). The Aged P. responds to almost any communication by saying, "All right, John, all right." Ironically, he derives great pleasure from reading the news aloud. Thus in one character, Dickens combines both loquaciousness and deafness. The Aged P.'s deafened loquaciousness is tolerated by Wemmick's filial love, as he says to Pip, "I won't offer an apology . . . for he isn't capable of many pleasures. . . .Only tip him a nod every now and then when he looks off his paper . . . and he'll be happy as a king" (315–16). Pip's nodding gestures are the simplest form of communication possible—affirmation.

The gesture, rooted in the body, acts as a way of interpellating silence into narration, of presenting a seemingly unmediated form of communication. Such a nonlinguistic communication, the very undoing of Dickens's own literary loquaciousness, becomes in the end of the novel the very powerful form of communication between Pip and his benefactor Magwitch. As the convict is dying, Pip says, "Sometimes he was almost, or quite unable to speak; then, he would answer me with slight pressures on my hand, and I grew to understand his meaning very well" (469).

In these moments, gesture becomes the ground for "true meaning." Its apparent unmediated presence, its unsignifiable meaning, transcendent to Pip, who understands it "very well," operates at the level of the instinct, of the body. The meaning of the pressure is erotic; it signifies love. Gesture defies and undoes the text, yet Dickens places it at the center of the text—silent gesture becomes the truth of the text.

What I have been trying to work through in this essay is the notion that a consideration of deafness (or any disability) in literature can amount to more than a compilation of the ways deaf characters are treated in literary works. It is interesting that when I have casually spoken about my intention to write on this subject, the most frequent assumption has been that I am writing a book about characters with disabilities in literature. When I have responded that such was not my intention, most people seemed quite confused about what if anything I would then write about. The phase of raising awareness about the treatment of disabled characters in literature has been ably carried through and continues to be studied, although, finally, there is a limit to what can be said—that disabled characters are usually villains or outcasts, but when they are not they are glorified and held up as testaments to the human spirit.

Disability can actually be more fruitfully considered in relation to social process and cultural production by beginning to lay bare the cultural assumptions at the very base of artifacts like plays, novels, and poems. Moreover, from a philo-

sophical point of view, the notion of disability reveals the epistemological bases and dialectical relations inherent in any notion of aesthetics. One might even say that the consideration of disability in this context, rather than being a marginal and eccentric focus of study, goes to the very heart of issues of representation, communication, language, ideology, and so on. In fact, those who pay attention to art and cultural production have really thought very little about the way such endeavors are based on normative practices that imply a normative body and normative communication. This essay, it is hoped, has been a prolegomenon of sorts to a future study of the complex interactions between the body, the text, and the world.

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