

# A POETICS OF SILENCE

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## Deafness, Poetics, and the Fate of the Senses

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Among the more durable tropes in modern poetics is an appeal to silence.<sup>1</sup> In Keats's ode, a Grecian urn depicting a wedding procession is described as an 'unravish'd bride of quietness',<sup>2</sup> a reference both to the urn and the virgin bride depicted on its surface.<sup>3</sup> The price of silence is death, nature stilled forever into art. Here, silence refers both to the body of the artwork—a 'well-wrought urn' in Cleanth Brooks's terms—and the body of its female subject, a connection that I will pursue with reference to disability.<sup>4</sup> 'Heard melodies are sweet', as Keats says in the same ode, 'but those unheard / Are sweeter' (lines 11–12). Unheard melodies appeal not to the sensate ear but to 'ditties of no tone' (14). Keats does not disparage heard melodies but suggests that those 'unheard' tap into another level of sensory experience too deep for tears and presumably inaccessible to ears. What, one might ask, would the oxymoronic music of 'no tone' sound like?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Peter Middleton, Rebecca Sanchez, and Maren Linnet for their helpful comments on early drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillingier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 372–3 (l. 1).

<sup>3</sup> My subtitle expresses a debt to Susan Stewart's important book, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), which studies the foundational role of poetry in human consciousness. Speaking of Giambattista Vico, Stewart explains, '[l]anguage here is pressured to be in some way commensurate to sense experience and at the same time intelligible to others... Language [and poetry] is the forum within which such a speaking subject emerges' (15).

<sup>4</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Although my focus will be on the role of silence in poetics, it is worth acknowledging that the dominant trend in poetry focuses on the study of sound and the vicissitudes of 'hearing' either represented in the text or manifested through the poem's prosody. The work of Susan Stewart, Don Ihde, Jonathan Culler, Eric Griffiths, and those who focus on the technologies of sound reproduction such as Garrett Stewart and Peter Szendy all presume that poetry is founded on the ear and the registration of acoustic information. Angela Leighton's *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (Cambridge,

Richard Wagner, reflecting on Beethoven's deafness, provided one answer:

A musician without hearing! Is a blind painter to be imagined?

But we have heard of a blind *Seer*. Like Tiresias, from whom the phenomenal world was withdrawn, and who, in its stead, discovered the basis of all phenomenality, the deaf Musician, undisturbed by the bustle of life, now heard only the harmonies of his soul and woke from its depths to that world which to him – had nothing more to say.<sup>6</sup>

Wagner was to change his mind about the advantages of deafness for Beethoven's music, but his remark offers an alternative view of the composer's 'tragic' deafness. From as early as 1801, according to Robin Wallace, Beethoven was composing while becoming almost totally deaf, a factor that helps explain the harmonic and rhythmic complexity of his late quartets and piano sonatas. By listening to the 'harmonies of his soul', according to Wagner, he was able to compose works like the *Grosse Fuge*, op. 133, which, to his contemporaries, was unhearable.<sup>7</sup>

Post-Romantic writers have provided a variety of linguistic and formal solutions to the challenge of representing silence, embodied in the work of Emily Dickinson, Stéphane Mallarmé, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, George Oppen, Claude Royet-Journoud, and Susan Howe. The silences they invoke are materially represented on the page by empty spaces, portmanteau verbal constructions, incomplete phrases, and graphic elements that thwart closure and frustrate paraphrase. Emily Dickinson's dashes or the variable fonts and indentations of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* are obvious instances of a poetry that invokes silences between and among words. Such graphic features are the surface manifestations of a philosophical recognition of language's inadequacy, the disparity between a word and the space it attempts to fill. A poetics of silence attempts to reveal the space of that disparity in material form, whether rendered on the page, in the voice, through manual signs on the body, or, as we shall see, by not speaking at all.

The work of Samuel Beckett offers a capacious survey of this disparity as his plays and novels became increasingly shorter, action reduced to minimal gestures and movements and dialogue condensed into single phrases—and finally, silence. The culmination of this tendency is Beckett's 1969 play *Breath*. At thirty-five seconds it may be the shortest dramatic work ever written. It is also the quietest. There is no 'action', in the usual theatrical sense, nor is there dialogue. A light gradually illuminates a stage littered with 'miscellaneous rubbish'.<sup>8</sup> Beckett's stage directions call for 'a

MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) provides a useful overview of, as she indicates in her subtitle, 'the work of sound in literature.'

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>7</sup> The work occasioned consternation in the Viennese press, causing one journalist to remark that 'it was incomprehensible, like Chinese': quoted in Robin Wallace, *Hearing Beethoven: A Story of Musical Loss and Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 182.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Breath. The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 210–11.

faint cry' reproduced through an amplified recording that is then repeated.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Kenneth Tynan, who solicited the work, Beckett indicated that the cry is that of breathing, the 'light coming up and going down on a stage littered with miscellaneous unidentifiable muck, synchronized with the sound of breath, once in and out, the whole (ha!) begun and ended by the same tiny vagitus-rattle.<sup>10</sup> Vagitus refers to the baby's first cry upon leaving the womb, suggesting that for Beckett human life begins as a breath that is also an inaugural utterance. Although he is not speaking of Beckett, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the vagitus as the inaugural cry of subjectivity, the 'first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once... Someone who comes to himself by hearing himself cry.'<sup>11</sup> The titular 'breath' is visually reinforced by the 'expiration and slow decrease of light' that provides a technological analogue to breathing. Beckett called *Breath* 'a farce in five acts', suggesting, albeit sardonically, that its minimalist shape belies a larger study of mediated destiny.<sup>12</sup>

In all of Beckett's plays silence is highly choreographed, the pauses between words carefully indicated, rhythms of speech given almost musical notation. Silence is the horizon toward which articulation aspires, even though in Beckett's plays characters talk incessantly—Lucky's logorrheic speech in *Waiting for Godot*, Hamm's music-hall routines in *Endgame*, Winnie's formulaic refrains in *Happy Day*, Mouth's endless monologue in *Not I*—to fill that silence with something resembling significance. *Breath* inverts that imperative by reducing speech to the primordial breath upon which life and speech depend. Most importantly for our concerns is that sensations of hearing, breathing, and sight are distributed through technologies of sound and visual reproduction. In his radio dramas, television plays, and film, Beckett deployed forms of sound reproduction to suggest the mediated nature of communication, whether in Krapp's use of a tape recorder to remember his past life, or in *Eh, Joe* with Joe listening to a recording of a woman's accusatory voice, or in the megaphone voice of *What Where* that appears to sanction torture. Against the voices that threaten to drown T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, silence promises order and

<sup>9</sup> In one version available on YouTube the 'cry' is the sound of heavy breathing. It is not, despite Beckett's instructions, 'faint' at all.

<sup>10</sup> *Breath* was originally intended as part of a prologue to Kenneth Tynan's erotic review *Oh! Calcutta!*, possibly to undercut that play's ribald content. Beckett was furious when he learned that his stage directions had been emended to include the fact that among the detritus on stage would be 'naked people'. Adding insult to injury was the photograph that accompanied the script which featured naked bodies among the refuse on stage. On the conflicts over the Tynan production see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 501–2.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 298, although the remark about *Breath* as farce is unattributed to a specific work by Beckett.

clarity.<sup>13</sup> Or as Clov says in *Endgame*, 'I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.'<sup>14</sup>

What is the noise of the world that makes silence so compelling?<sup>15</sup> Is modern silence distinct from silence in the past? Cultural historians and sound theorists might respond by speaking of changing demographics, urbanization, migration, mobility (railroads, automobiles), sound reproduction (telephones, movies, radio), and the apparition of the crowd that so intrigued (and repulsed) Poe, Baudelaire, Pound, and Eliot. Within this tradition silence promises a site for solitude and reflection or, to complete my appropriation of Pound, 'petals on a wet, black bough.'<sup>16</sup> For later poets who lived through the horrors of World War II, silence is an inevitable response to historical trauma. For Paul Celan, the Holocaust makes speech and writing untenable. His answer to Adorno's famous query about the futility of writing after Auschwitz is a language of indirection and concision. In his Büchner Prize lecture, *Der Meridian*, Celan notes that 'the poem unmistakably shows a strong bent toward falling silent.'<sup>17</sup> Words no longer secure the world; they are, in William Franke's terms, 'not names but traces, shattered and scattered remnants of an expropriated, destroyed meaning.'<sup>18</sup>

Mallarmé diagnosed a crisis in poetry that was much more than a matter of the viability of the alexandrine; it was a crisis in language that had become instrumentalized and debased by the marketplace: 'Language in the hands of the mob leads to the same facility and directness as does money.'<sup>19</sup> A new poetry requires a fusion of senses such that '[w]e now *hear* undeniable rays of light, like arrows gilding and piercing the meanderings of song.'<sup>20</sup> This synaesthesia or 'derangement of the senses', as Rimbaud advocated, would redistribute sensation, allowing one to experience the totality of sensate life in a single word or phrase. Rimbaud and Mallarmé

<sup>13</sup> 'We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown': T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 129–31 (ll. 3–7).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), understands noise as power, against which music is 'an instrument of differentiating' (5). Noise is power and thus, under capitalism, must be ordered, rationalized, and commodified. Music for Attali exists as an attempt to organize noise into an aesthetic totality, but it remains vulnerable to rationalization through censorship, on the one hand, and to commodification in the culture industry on the other.

<sup>16</sup> Ezra Pound, 'In a Station of the Metro', in *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 109: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.'

<sup>17</sup> Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 401–14 (409).

<sup>18</sup> William Franke, 'Poetics of Silence in the Post-Holocaust Poetry of Paul Celan', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 2, nos 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2013), 137–58 (142).

<sup>19</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry', in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 34–45 (42–3).

<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry', 39.

were hardly thinking of disability, but inadvertently their celebration of sensory *dérèglement* describes an important aspect of disability experience.<sup>21</sup> For deaf poets, rays of light are heard differently through the movements of hands and facial expressions of sign language. For the blind photographer Evgan Bavcar, the subjects he captures with his camera must be touched and felt to be seen. The deaf drummer Evelyn Glennie claims, counter-intuitively, that her job is to ‘listen’, albeit through various sensory inputs.<sup>22</sup> She refers to the use of her whole body in performance as ‘touching the sound’. This redistribution of sensation in disability aesthetics is a recognition of bodily contingency and capability that are the cornerstone of aesthetics since Aristotle figured tragedy around the limping, blind Oedipus. In its eighteenth-century usage, *aesthesia* means *corporeal* perception or what we might today call proprioception.<sup>23</sup>

I have elsewhere described my use of the term ‘redistribution of the senses’ as a variation on a more familiar usage by Jacques Rancière, who argues that aesthetics *distributes* the sensible—what one can hear and see and taste, what is sayable and unsayable—within a social totality.<sup>24</sup> When the state determines what can be thought, known, heard, or seen, the aesthetic function is enlisted as a form of policing and control. Modernist art and literature upsets this policing function by distributing sensory experience differently, whether by deconstructing the retinal image in abstract painting, reimagining tonality around different pitch systems, or defamiliarizing conventional linguistic usage.

My slight adjustment of Rancière’s phrase emphasizes how an art that *distributes* the senses toward a new, inclusive commons also *redistributes*, or resites social values assigned to each sense. ‘Silence’ and ‘sound’ are two such social values that mean one thing for hearing people and another for people who are deaf and who are mischaracterized as living in a ‘silent’ world. Many deaf people have some residual hearing, and those who wear cochlear implants or use hearing aids live on a spectrum of sonic experiences. As Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys explain, ‘[t]he truth is that many Deaf people know a great deal about sound, and that sound itself – not just its absence – plays a central role in their lives.’<sup>25</sup> The binary opposition

<sup>21</sup> ‘Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de *tous les sens*’: Arthur Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871, *Arthur Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 301.

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Glennie, ‘How to Truly Listen’, *TED* (2003), [https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn\\_glennie\\_shows\\_how\\_to\\_listen/transcript#t-735162](https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen/transcript#t-735162).

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière describes the break between classical and modern aesthetic theory as one from an emphasis on ‘ways of doing’ to ‘ways of sensible being’: *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 11.

<sup>24</sup> I have discussed Rancière in ‘Siting Sound: Redistributing the Senses in Christine Sun Kim’, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021), 219–37. Rancière develops the idea of distribution of the senses in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys, *Deaf in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 93.

sound/silence must be qualified by recognizing the social meaning of sound and the systems of communication that reinforce it. A redistribution of the senses acknowledges the multimodal nature of sensory experience and the persons for whom it is a value. When deaf poets and artists redistribute 'hearing' to other senses, they provide insights into the variability of the sensorium.

## Disability Aesthetics

When Odysseus deafens his crew against the Sirens' song, he provides an early literary example of hearing loss as a metaphor for not-knowing. Kirkē warns that if the Sirens' tempting song is heard it will lead to disaster. On her advice, Odysseus lashes himself to the mast to hear their song—to witness its beauty and power—while retaining his authority as captain of the ship. Deafness will permit the crew to ply their oars and pass safely beyond the seductive music while Odysseus may witness the alluring song without succumbing to its seduction. It is one of many instances in the *Odyssey* where the hero's cunning and cleverness anticipate what Adorno and Horkheimer call the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. By adhering to the law set down by the gods he discovers an 'escape clause in the contract which enables him to fulfill it while eluding it'. Odysseus, as the prototype for bourgeois rationality, masters nature by renouncing it; he 'listens to the song of pleasure and thwarts it as he seeks to thwart death'.<sup>26</sup>

In the chapter devoted to the Sirens in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, our modern day Odysseus, Leopold Bloom, admires the skills of the deaf waiter, Pat, at the Ormond bar and notes that he 'seehears lipspeech', condensing the twin modalities by which hearing and sight are joined; he hears by reading lips.<sup>27</sup> Bloom's empathy for Pat may resonate with his own outcast Jewish identity in which he is figuratively neither heard nor seen by the Irish nationalists he encounters throughout his perambulations around Dublin. Joyce figures the Sirens in this chapter as a couple of barmaids whose irreverent banter provides a comedic counter voice to the glib voices of the bar's male patrons. Pat's deafness links him to the more proletarian rowers of Homer's poem, but he is also Odyssean in his capable skills as a waiter while engaging with his clients and barmaids. As Maren Linett suggests, '*Ulysses* recasts the

<sup>26</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 59.

<sup>27</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1986), 232. It is appropriate that the one deaf character in *Ulysses* appears in the 'Sirens' chapter whose organ is the ear and whose art is music. For a full discussion of blindness and deafness in the novel, see Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 119–41.

issue of knowledge, associating both its blind and deaf characters not quite with the absence of knowledge but with its suspension.<sup>28</sup>

These two examples, ancient and modern, suggest the continuity of sensory loss—or more accurately sensory *difference*—as a theme in works that in ‘suspending’ knowledge provide an alternate perspective on what can be known. A disability aesthetics, in Tobin Siebers’s terms, ‘names the emergence of disability in modern art as a significant presence, one that shapes modern art in new ways and creates a space for the development of disabled artists and subjects.’<sup>29</sup> A disabled character is not merely a metaphor for some ethical failing or social ill but a presence that unsettles the integrity of sensory response, causing a degree of what Ato Quayson calls ‘aesthetic nervousness.’<sup>30</sup> As Siebers says, ‘[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies’, bringing the aesthetic into the affective and social realm where some bodies are rendered normal and others disqualified.<sup>31</sup> Such considerations are rather different from the classical view of aesthetics as a philosophy of disinterested judgment.

The problem for deaf poets is somewhat complicated since most culturally Deaf people think of themselves as a linguistic minority rather than persons who live with a disability. But whether they compose poems in American Sign language (ASL) or write in English or other languages, whether prelingually deaf, late-deafened, or CODAs (children of deaf adults), a recurrent theme within Deaf culture is the presumption of hearing as a putative norm, what activists call ‘audism’. Rather than speak of ‘hearing loss’, deaf advocates now speak of ‘Deaf gain’ and the advantages of speaking with the eye and hand.<sup>32</sup> The work of deaf artist Christine Sun Kim, for example, is often about the cultural and social value of sound. In her 2019 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, she submitted a series of large panels depicting her ‘Deaf Rage’ at institutions and public venues that presume a hearing audience. Her drawings depict a series of geometric angles (‘acute rage’, ‘obtuse rage’) that express degrees of rage at airports without proper signage, museums without ASL interpreters, airplanes without captioned movies.<sup>33</sup> Her critique of a hearing-centred world permits (invites?) viewers to imagine public spaces and soundscapes from different angles.

A number of recent films have explored the limitations of the presumptive reliance on sound as an adjunct of visual language, often using captioning, sign language, and silence as key elements: Caroline Link’s *Beyond Silence* (1996), Zeinabu

<sup>28</sup> Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> My capitalization of Deaf reflects the practice of using the capital ‘D’ when referring to Deaf cultural identity and small ‘d’ when referring to audiological and biological condition.

<sup>33</sup> I discuss Christine Sun Kim’s ‘Deaf Rage’ exhibition in ‘Siting Sound’, 233–5.

irene Davis's *Compensation* (1999), Éric Lartigau's *La Famille Béliet* (2014), Todd Haynes's *Wonderstruck* (2017), John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* I (2018) and II (2021), and Sian Heder's *CODA* (2021).<sup>34</sup> As Lennard Davis says, these films are largely intended for hearing audiences, but there are variations among them that illustrate the director's awareness of cultural Deafness.<sup>35</sup> In addition to offering an alternative to the sound-based film these recent versions reorient the relationship between sound and text, between the primordial 'voice' that underwrites subjectivity and the distributed voice of media technology.

In Darius Marder's 2021 film *Sound of Metal*, silence is at times the viewer's experience as well as that of the film's protagonist. In an interview with Alison O'Daniel, Marder refers to his sound perspective as 'POH' or 'point of hearing'.<sup>36</sup> His transformation of the more familiar phrase 'point of view' reverses the usual ocularcentric treatment of film—the gaze, the 'camera eye', and the 'viewer's perspective'. Of course, the phrase 'point of hearing' privileges an auditory perspective, but Marder's film is also about the ideology of hearing and what it means to lose it. By adopting a 'point of hearing', Marder redirects the gaze of the camera onto the soundscape and most importantly onto the complex interplay of visual and acoustic information.

*Sound of Metal* concerns a heavy-metal rock drummer, Ruben (Riz Ahmed), who loses his hearing and must confront the challenges this poses to his masculinity, his social and sexual relations, and, not insignificantly, his sobriety. When his hearing suddenly drops out, he becomes—understandably—angered and shaken, unable to process this volcanic change. The film mimics his hearing loss by cutting out the soundtrack from time to time, giving the film's hearing listeners some sense of Ruben's disorientation. Ruben and his girlfriend Lou are both recovering addicts, four years sober, for whom music and their relationship have been crucial for recovery. Now, Lou fears that Ruben will relapse because of hearing loss and works to place him in a sober living community for deaf people. Although Ruben initially repudiates his own deafness, he gradually learns ASL and comes to appreciate the support he receives from the Deaf community and the version of tough love that the group's leader, Joe (Paul Raci), administers.

Despite his growing familiarity with sign language and the friendship he develops in the deaf rehab centre, Ruben has not relinquished his desire to regain his hearing. He sells off his recording equipment and the big Airstream trailer that he

<sup>34</sup> It is worth remembering that silent films offered deaf viewers equal access to the viewing experience since all films prior to 1927 conveyed dialogue through intertitles. On the history of captioning see George J. Downey, *Closed Captioning: Subtitling, Stenography, and the Digital Convergence of Text with Television* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On deaf people and silent films see Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). See also Michael Davidson, *Distressing Language: Disability and the Poetics of Error* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), ch. 7, 'A Captioned Life.'

<sup>35</sup> Lennard J. Davis, 'Screening Deafness', *Los Angeles Review of Books* 19 (September 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Alison O'Daniel, 'The Noise Inside: Writer/Director Darius Marder on *Sound of Metal*', *Film-maker Magazine* (28 October 2020).

and Lou used for their tours to raise money for a cochlear implant. After the operation, he returns to the sober living community, hoping to continue living there, at least temporarily. Joe tells him that his implant may cure his hearing but not his mind and that his continued presence at the farm would challenge the deaf protocols of the community by attempting to fix a condition that the residents do not deem a problem. What is important, Joe says, is to achieve a ‘moment of stillness’ in which one is no longer trying to fix or remedy loss. Ruben sets out on his own, living for a time in a motel while his wounds, both physical and psychological, heal, and he contemplates his next move as a returning hearing person.

*Sound of Metal* is, in some respects, a ‘silent film’. Spoken dialogue is open-captioned, and sound is often modulated through Ruben’s hearing loss. During the segment at the deaf rehab centre, the members’ sign language is not captioned, thereby instantiating Ruben’s alienated—and perhaps the hearing viewer’s own—perspective on the Deaf world. To further the alienation effect of Ruben’s hearing loss, director Marder and his sound designer Nicolas Becker created a soundscape that utilized foley effects that replicate the mechanical output of cochlear implants. The dull thud of drums, muffled conversations, and the shrill electronic screeching of the implant itself occupy much of the soundtrack. The film occasionally returns to what hearing people might regard as ‘subjective sound’, but it is entirely possible to watch the film without the soundtrack, filling in gaps in communication and providing one’s own audio cues. Becker, who has experienced hearing loss, explains that as the film moves forward subjective sound ‘becomes less and less strong. The more you go in the film, the more it comes back to typical levels. We come back to the kind of typical world that people know.’<sup>37</sup>

*Sound of Metal* provides a useful example of how a medium whose theorization is often based on sight has been modified to foreground its ‘point of hearing’. By using non-professional actors, some of whom are deaf, and by warping the soundtrack to reflect Ruben’s auditory experience, the film embraces the possibilities of silence, static, noise, and sign to create several apertures for its reception. Critics of the film have qualified its minimal treatment of deaf people and sign language and its thematics of hearing loss as a tragic event, but those qualifications at least move the film into a debate about what it means to represent deafness in film and what it means to be an audience.

## Speaking in Hands

One of the more important documents in post-war poetics, Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ (1950) stresses the importance of the poet’s body in composition.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Reilly, ‘How *Sound of Metal* Reimagined the Silence in Hearing Loss,’ *Vulture* 12 (2020).

According to Olson the poetic line should extend from the musculature and breathing of the poet rather than adhering to traditional metrics or syllabics. As for the management of smaller units, the poet must draw on the resources of the ear: 'I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed.'<sup>38</sup> Olson's emphasis on the variable qualities of the syllable and its proximity to 'mind' derives from Ezra Pound's emphasis on 'melopoeia', 'the dance of the intellect among words', and the 'variable meter' advocated by William Carlos Williams.<sup>39</sup>

What would happen to Olson's formulation if the poet were deaf and signed poems in ASL? It may be only a thought exercise to imagine what the equivalent sign language features would be to the ear and audition, but it is worth extending Olson's thought to what he could not imagine. At one level, his emphasis on the body as poetic resource would speak to disabled artists and poets whose different body-minds demand or enable different aesthetic strategies. And this emphasis has implications for deaf poets who sign their poems on the body. Olson's emphasis on the 'ear', however, would seem to pose a severe limit. Clayton Valli and other deaf poets have argued that handshapes and other classifiers would be the basic building blocks of sign language poetry, and like the syllable can be modified based on contextual factors. But the point should not be whether one can map elements of English language onto sign language, a kind of linguistic settler colonialism, but rather what new forms of poetry are produced by a language composed in space, with hands, body position, and facial expression.

Let's take the example of diction: the choice of words in a text and the multiple levels of language deployed in a poem that manage the variability of spoken language. Daniel Tiffany discusses the ways that diction in poetry often code-switches between registers that signify a poet's class, gender, race, and regional background, the 'social textures of language associated with various communities.'<sup>40</sup> A poet's incorporation of vernacular argots, pidgins, or interlingual merging of several languages—his examples include Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Cathy Park Hong, Rodrigo Toscano—brings dominant and subaltern languages into conversation. The same could be said for deaf poets, but the categories of shared experience, the meaning of 'communities', might be different depending, for example, on whether the poet was educated in an oral school, a community with a large deaf population, a community

<sup>38</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose: Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 239–49 (242).

<sup>39</sup> Pound discusses 'logopoeia' in 'How to Read', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, n.d.), 25. Williams discusses his ideas of variable metres or 'variable foot' in various late interviews and essays. On Williams's theory of variable metres see Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Tiffany, 'Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language', *Tupelo Quarterly* 20 (2021), <https://www.tupeloquarterly.com/tq20-table-of-contents/>.

of Black signers, a public school, or a family that does not sign.<sup>41</sup> As Margalit Fox has written, the origin of ASL itself is a product of intersecting dictions.<sup>42</sup> When Thomas Gallaudet opened the first school for deaf students in Hartford, Connecticut, with his native French deaf teacher Laurent Clerc, he incorporated Clerc's French sign language overlaid with imposed English word order, tenses, and pronouns, plus local vernacular and 'homesigns' developed among the students independent of their classes. ASL, like all languages, grew by a rhizomatic path from pidgins to creole and then to increasingly more complex syntactic and morphological structures.

In my own experience working with several ASL tutors and teachers, I have noticed dramatic differences in the meanings and shapes of various signs, depending on generation, schooling, and family background. And there is plenty of sign playfulness between languages. The ASL sign for UNDERSTAND involves the right index finger pointing up next to the temple. One of my tutors joked by taking the sign for STAND, the index and third fingers in a 'V' shape on top of the left palm, but inverting the sign so that STAND was, indeed, standing *under* the palm. This example reveals the 'residues of shared languages' that include the overwhelming authority of audism, the ideology that privileges hearing. The portmanteau sign for audism, THINK-HEARING, is represented by an index finger rotating in front of the forehead. Here the conventional sign for SPEECH, the index rotating in front of the mouth, is shifted to the head to show how 'speech' is naturalized as ideology.<sup>43</sup>

Let me illustrate these points through two examples of how diction is used in some lines by John Ashbery and in Clayton Valli's poem 'Snowflake' (1990). Ashbery's 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' (1977) is an operatic display of multiple dictions, from the sublime to the ridiculous, different levels of rhetoric often overlapping within a few phrases:

That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he's  
Done to me now! I scarce dare approach me mug's attenuated  
Reflection in yon hubcap, so jaundiced, so *déconfit*  
Are its lineaments – fun, no doubt, for some quack phrenologist's  
Fern-clogged waiting room, but hardly what you'd call  
Companionable.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Historical segregation of Black populations into separate neighbourhoods and schools has led to the development of a distinct black signing tradition which makes more use of two-handed signing, broader gestures, and idiomatic variants of ASL.

<sup>42</sup> Margalit Fox, *Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals about the Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 32–7.

<sup>43</sup> On THINK-HEARING see Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>44</sup> John Ashbery, 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood', in *John Ashbery: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 227 (ll. 11–16).

Here the wildly shifting set of sociolects reflects class and cultural levels, from Looney Tunes ('That mean old cartoonist', 'me mug's attenuated / Reflection') to cocktail party banter ('so jaundiced, so *déconfit*') to intellectual camp ('quack phrenologist's / Fern-clogged waiting room').<sup>45</sup> Ashbery's dance of dictions is in some respects a verbal collage of Hollywood movies, one part Walter Brennan, the other part Laurence Olivier. These sudden transitions imitate the 1953 Daffy Duck cartoon it celebrates (Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuck*, 1953) in which Daffy undergoes multiple transformations—and erasures—by the absent 'mean old cartoonist'. Just as Daffy is becoming comfortable playing his ukulele in a tropical setting with palm trees, he is rudely moved—on skis—to a snowy alpine landscape. Deixis in the poem strives to locate cartoonist and Daffy, artist and creation, only to expose the placelessness of identities, the absence of any authorizing subjectivity in a media-drenched environment. The mediated subject exists as a portrait in a convex mirror, a hubcap, that expands the 'mug' to grotesque proportions.

Clayton Valli's signed poem 'Snowflake' is a different species altogether in tone but nevertheless manages to move between registers on several significant levels. I have discussed this poem elsewhere, but I want to call attention to Valli's fusion of diction and deixis (aspects of language like pronouns and prepositions that situate individuals in relation) in a lyric whose centre concerns a conversation between a deaf boy and his hearing father.<sup>46</sup> This conversation is framed by an opening and closing lyric describing a cold winter day. The poet looks through a window and sees a tree full of leaves that then fall onto grass that is withered and barren. There is no colour; everything is grey. Suddenly a snowflake falls in a diagonal movement. Valli's sign for snowflake, the thumb and index finger connected in an 'o' shape, moves across his body from left to right.<sup>47</sup> This image of the solitary snowflake inspires a memory of an earlier time, signalled by signs for HEARTBEAT followed by MEMORY and concluding with NEVER FORGET EYES.

The eyes that inspire his emotional response belong to a young boy speaking to his father. The father, who does not sign, is trying to impress his hearing friends by asking his deaf son to verbalize answers to questions: 'what is your name', 'how old are you?'. Valli signs the entire poem in ASL, but switches registers to represent the father's oral speech and the child's halting attempts to respond. Spatial and positional deixis here is embodied by the father's shifting body position as he addresses his friends, using the sign for spoken nonsense ('blah blah blah') to indicate the boy's confusion about his father's oral conversation. He turns to the son to ask him

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Peter Middleton for the phrase 'intellectual camp'.

<sup>46</sup> See 'Tree Tangled in Tree: Resiting Poetry through ASL', in Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 100–15.

<sup>47</sup> Clayton Valli, 'Snowflake', in *Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL*, VHS (Burtonsville, MD: Sign Media, 1990).

questions and then adopts the son's point of view as he attempts to respond to his father's questions. Their interchange is conducted in Signed Exact English (SEE), an invented language that imposes English syntax on ASL signs. It also includes finger-spelling of certain words that do not have ASL equivalents such as the copula in the phrases 'how old a-r-e you?' and 'my name i-s...':

The image of this early encounter fades, and Valli returns to the winter day and a falling snowflake signed using ASL syntax and an innovative collaboration between dominant and subordinate hands. The snowflake that falls in the first part from left to right now falls in a diagonal from right to left using the non-dominant hand. Valli uses at least four levels of manual signing: fingerspelling, SEE, regular ASL, and a version of ASL that modifies handshapes, body position, and facial expression. This, in Tiffany's terms, marks not formalist experiment but 'a disruption and expansion of poetic diction' by making the dominant language (English) subservient to ASL.<sup>48</sup>

Deixis and diction are intertwined in the way that the interchange between hearing father and deaf son replicates the historical division of oral and Deaf cultures. It may also replicate Valli's own experience as a deaf child of hearing, non-signing parents. The very use of SEE embodies this history. One might add that for a deaf person the presence of SEE *is* a kind of diction since it brings the 'outside' into the poem as a creolized form of sign language. But this interchange is itself contained or wrapped into a more lyrical use of ASL in the framing lyric concerning the cold winter day, suggesting that the poet, Clayton Valli, has contained this unequal relationship on his own (signed) terms. 'Snowflake' is about the positional relationship not only of speakers but of unequal power relationships between hearing and deaf persons.

Valli is a much more conservative poet than more recent deaf practitioners like Peter Cook, Sean Forbes, Signmark, and Prinz D who have drawn from rap and urban subcultures as well as the activism on behalf of Deaf cultural identity to create a vibrant deaf jam tradition.<sup>49</sup> And needless to say, Valli comes out of a very different aesthetic tradition from Ashbery. Although he has likened his use of ASL to Robert Frost and the prosodic traditions of English poetry, his ventriloquized use of several idiolects links him more closely to the New York School poet than one might think. For Ashbery the 'outside' is, as I have said, like the image in a convex mirror, a version of oneself enlarged and distorted. For Valli the 'outside' is a culture that expects him to assimilate the dominant culture's attitudes towards hearing and speech.

<sup>48</sup> Tiffany, 'Speaking in Tongues,' 29.

<sup>49</sup> Judy Lief's documentary film *Deaf Jam* is a good introduction to new def/Deaf poetries; <https://www.newday.com/film/deaf-jam>.

## The Silence at Epidaurus

In *The Five Senses* (*Les Cinq Sens*), Michel Serres describes sitting in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, listening to silence. If this seems like a contradiction in terms, it is one that Serres exploits as he reflects on the healing properties of silence in an amphitheatre famous for its perfect acoustics: '[we] are healed better by leaving noise behind than by diving into language'.<sup>50</sup> He realizes that he prolongs that noise by 'diving into language' through his essay. The tutelary spirit at Epidaurus is Asclepius, the god of medicine, whom Socrates, according to Plato, invoked in his last words: 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius' (90). Socrates on his deathbed asks to be 'healed', not from the hemlock's poison but from the noise of the world he perpetuates by continuing to talk. The silence that Serres experiences at Epidaurus anticipates the silence to come when language and the body are finished.

Suddenly a group of tourists interrupts Serres's reverie: 'They talk, squawk, discuss, and exclaim, admire out loud, call to each other, give explanations . . . and test, for the hundredth time, the location's exact acoustic properties'.<sup>51</sup> The collective voice 'detonates peace' and destroys, for Serres, the amphitheatre's contract with the gods and their healing powers. Serres's phrasing epitomizes the endurance of that poetics of silence with which I began, expressing as with my Keats example that the extreme condition of silence is death. What Serres wishes to escape is the roar of the crowd: 'the collective only believes in its own noise'.<sup>52</sup> One wonders what would have happened if Serres had considered not only what he heard at Epidaurus but also what the experience of a deaf person might have been. What is a language that hears without speech, or that speaks by other means—touch, gesture, vibration? Deaf persons must wonder what all the fuss is about at Epidaurus since they are perfectly able to communicate and are hardly irritated at the eruption of crowd noise. The end of language is not death, as Serres suggests, but the continuity of community *in* and *through* a language of signs.

In this chapter I have argued that the long modernist period, from Keats's Grecian urn to the present, has cultivated a poetics of silence that is silent about its presumptions about sound. As Rebecca Sanchez notes, 'so deeply enmeshed in our language use is the concept of sound that even the ways we describe the absence of audition cannot help but make reference to it'.<sup>53</sup> What Sanchez calls a 'Deaf epistemology' allows us to rethink the modernist period through a deaf lens, rejecting the equation of deafness with unknowing ('what, are you deaf?') and thinking about the distributed nature of knowledge among the senses. This move is not a compensatory

<sup>50</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 85.

<sup>51</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 86.

<sup>53</sup> Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism*, 2.

account that treats ocular models as substitutes for hearing loss. Rather, it is a recognition of the variable nature of sensate life. When a sensory level is absent, it is not a loss but a different kind of melody, a phenomenological space for those ‘ditties of no tone’ to which Keats aspired.

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