

Hearing the silence

malcolm bull

Of the few myths about the sense of hearing, the most memorable is that of Ulysses and the Sirens. Lashed to the mast of his ship, Ulysses alone experiences the pleasure of the Sirens' song, while the crew, their ears plugged with balls of wax, row on regardless of his signals to be released. Like most myths, this story can be interpreted in many ways, but the question of hearing is obviously crucial since the narrative is concerned with the power of the voice, the desire to listen, the difference between those who can hear and those who are unable to hear, and the problems of wordless communication. Nevertheless, of the literary reworkings of the myth, it is perhaps only Joyce's that develops these themes.

In the Sirens episode in *Ulysses*, Joyce separates the enchantment of song from the allure of the barmaids in Ormond's Bar, and allows the experience of hearing to become the axis around which the narrative revolves. It begins with the sound of a tuning fork heard from the saloon: 'You hear? It throbbed, pure, purer, softly and softlier, its buzzing prongs. Longer in dying call.' The single fading note of the tuning fork is followed by a sequence of songs sung or played on the piano, but not everyone can hear them equally well. When Simon Dedalus sings an aria from Flotow's *Martha*,

Bloom signed to Pat, bald Pat is a waiter hard of hearing, to set ajar the door of the bar. The door of the bar. So. That will do. Pat, waiter, waited, waiting to hear, for he was hard of hear by the door.

—*Sorrow from me seemed to depart.*

Through the hush of air a voice sang to them, low, not rain, not leaves in murmur, like no voice of strings of reeds or whatdoyoucallthem dulcimers, touching their still ears with words, still hearts of their each his remembered lives. Good, good to hear: sorrow from them each seemed to from both depart when first they heard.

But, of course, we do not know exactly how much of 'love's old sweet song' Pat actually hears, or how many of his sorrows the song dispelled. Maybe little, probably few. Shortly afterwards Bloom tries to get his attention:

Pat! Doesn't hear. Deaf beetle he is.

Car near there now. Talk. Talk. Pat! Settling those napkins. Lot of ground he must cover in the day. Paint face behind on him then he'd be two. Wish they'd sing more. Keep my mind off.

Bald Pat who is bothered mitred the napkins. Pat is a waiter hard of his hearing. Pat is a waiter who waits while you wait. Hee hee hee hee.

Like the crew of Ulysses' ship, Pat keeps things going while those who can hear are enthralled by the magic of sound. One of the barmaids holds a seashell to George Lidwell's ear: 'Hear! He heard. Wonderful. She held it to her own and through the sifted light pale gold in contrast glided. To hear.'

And it is not just shells that contain music: 'Sea, wind, leaves, thunder, waters, cows lowing, the cattle market, cocks, hens don't crow, snakes hisses. There's music everywhere.' From this, Pat is largely excluded, and not by chance, for as Joyce notes when Bob Cowley plays the minuet from *Don Giovanni*, pleasure and exclusion from pleasure are intimately connected:

Court dresses of all descriptions in castle chambers dancing. Misery. Peasants outside. Green starving faces eating dockleaves. Nice that is. Look: look, look, look, look, look: you look at us.

Just as the enjoyment of the dancers in the castle is enhanced by the sense that they are being watched by those who cannot participate, so, in the bar, a series of auditory pleasures is thrown into relief by the constant presence of someone who cannot fully enjoy them. Ben Dollard sings 'The Croppy Boy': 'Listen. Bloom listened. Richie Goulding listened. And by the door deaf Pat, bald Pat, tipped Pat, listened.'¹

Joyce's version of the Sirens is unusual in two respects. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, but unlike most other interpreters, he makes it clear that the story hinges on the differential nature of the experience of the Sirens. In the figure of Pat, we have a reincarnation of the crew whose inability to experience the Sirens' song is the chief guarantee of its beauty. Here there are obviously questions to be asked about the nature

of aesthetic experience: who would believe in the enchantment of the song if everyone had heard it and lived? But what is peculiar to Joyce is his willingness to recast the tale in terms not of a spiritual or aesthetic incapacity but of a physical one. The pleasures enjoyed by the patrons of Ormond's Bar are of a fairly ordinary kind, yet they too are exclusive, for the experience of hearing is no more universal than an invitation to a dance. Pat may be folding napkins rather than eating dockleaves, but the structure of the situation is the same. The questions that arise are therefore not about a specific form of experience, but about the nature of experience itself. How far is our experience of the world determined by the real or imagined inability of others to experience it in the same way?

I see a voice

This is the question addressed in Jonathan Rée's remarkable study of the history and philosophical implications of deafness, *I See a Voice*.^{*} The Sirens do not feature in Rée's book, but the myth can be used to articulate some of its recurring themes. The central, and by far the longest, section of *I See a Voice* is devoted to a history of deaf education from the seventeenth century to the present. This is followed by a sequence of brief essays on the role of the senses in modern philosophy and aesthetics. The opening section, a series of provocative phenomenological meditations on hearing and the experience of sound, sets the agenda and raises the questions the book sets out to answer. The first of these is one Rée first put to himself as a child, when he tried to simulate the effects of blindness and deafness by screwing up his eyes and sticking his fingers in his ears. Which incapacity would be worse?, he wondered. Rée takes the question as it stands, but the experiment, surely a common one in childhood, may be less an exploration of disability than an attempt to place a value on certain abilities, and a value on oneself as a being who has them. Trying out the role of the deaf (or the blind) is not like trying on a new lipstick – no one is going to persist with the experiment even if they enjoy it – its purpose is to affirm the satisfactory nature of status quo: the more unpleasant the experiment, the more gratifying the result.

To some degree the history of the treatment of the deaf by the non-deaf can be viewed in the same way, with the deaf being permanent experimental subjects for the ongoing self-appraisal of the hearing.

If, as Rée suggests, we respond to voices as we do to faces, then not having a voice is like not having a face. (The idea is captured by Joyce's terse 'Paint face behind on him and then he'd be two': Pat's face is as blank and inexpressive as the back of his head.) And without faces or voices, people do not have identities, so for most of history, deafness (or at least lifelong pre-lingual deafness) has been considered sufficiently dehumanizing that it warranted the exclusion of the deaf from civil, religious and social benefits. As Rée observes, 'Few groups in history have suffered such sustained and uncomprehending cruelty as the so-called "deaf and dumb". In most civilizations they have been treated like animals if not worse.'

The corollary of the obliteration of the identity of the deaf is that the hearing have been free to construct them as the negation of themselves. From antiquity onwards, a maximally negative appraisal of the condition of the speechless deaf was accompanied by an exceedingly high valuation on auditory and oral skills – a valuation that persists in conservative social forms such as religion and the law. Somewhere around the time of the Renaissance, things began to change. The invention of printing, the spread of literacy, and a new confidence in the power of observation all contributed to a reassessment of the condition of the deaf. Rée, who is wary of historical generalizations, might not agree, but it is hard not to see this shift as part of a move to a more ocularcentric culture – the new willingness to teach the deaf written language going along with the recognition that shared participation in the visible world might be a sufficient basis for acknowledgement of a common humanity.

However, teaching the deaf to read, write, spell out through gestures, and even enunciate written language only allowed them to simulate participation in a linguistic community. Taught in this way, the deaf lacked both the fluency and the ready comprehension of ideas that characterized hearing speakers. Two means of achieving this were developed. The first involved the systematization of a language of gesture, based partly upon the gestures through which the deaf communicated with each other, and partly upon the direct translation of the vocabulary of spoken languages into signs. The second, which could be combined with the first, but which was often presented as an exclusive alternative, was to teach the deaf to lip-read and to speak. Much of Rée's book is concerned with the historical development of both systems

^{*} Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses*, HarperCollins, London, 1999. xvi + 399 pp., £19.99 hb., 0 00 255793 2.

and with the competition between them that, to some degree, persists to this day. But it concludes with the realization that the language of gesture is, in fact, just as much a natural language as any spoken language, in that it has more or less the same structural and psychological character. Rather than being alingual subhumans, or having a distinctively visual rather than a verbal language, the deaf are no more different from the hearing than are speakers of one language from another. For a child, imagining what it is like to be deaf need be no more terrifying than imagining what it is like to be French.

The physiognomy of words

Rée's story is an unfamiliar one told in engaging detail, and yet its basic dynamic is not all that different from the stories that can be told about other disadvantaged groups, once excluded or marginalized, but now accepted as merely different. Like all such narratives, it is simultaneously a story about the acceptance and understanding of the excluded other, and the reinterpretation of the dominant identity. What is interesting about Rée's subject is that it potentially illustrates the relationship between the dynamics of emancipation and the development of new models of sensation and language. Every emancipation involves the marginal group being apprehended differently, and a new openness of communication. What is unusual about the deaf is that we can specify the exact changes involved: the deaf who, like Victorian children, were once seen but not heard, are now heard as well, and the recognition of equality of communicative ability has come from the acceptance that spoken language is in no way superior to gestural. But to what extent are these changes specific to the condition of deafness, and to what extent are they illustrative of the new understandings of sensation and language involved in other emancipations during the same historical period?

It is difficult to answer this question from within Rée's text, for although he identifies the folk-metaphysical assumptions that helped to perpetuate discrimination against the deaf, most of what follows deals with deaf education. According to Rée the two chief metaphysical prejudices are the idea that 'the voice is intrinsically connected with the existence of a self-identical soul, spirit, or inward subjectivity', and the belief that 'experience must ultimately be analysed into the contributions made by the various bodily senses'. He concludes by rejecting both of these ideas, and arguing both that 'some grasp of the world in general must precede our apprehen-

sion of particular sensory qualities within it' and that 'strictly speaking we have no such thing as a voice of our own'. These are not particularly controversial opinions within late-twentieth-century philosophy, but it is not the successful deployment of gestural and oral communication by the deaf that has made them commonplace. Conversely, the emancipation of the deaf seems to have taken place more or less independently of the philosophical developments that have displaced folk metaphysics. Although Rée presents illuminating parallel narratives, he establishes few direct links between deaf emancipation and the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophy. If there are connections, they must be operating at a more general level. We therefore need to consider whether, if there is a link, it is because the philosophical changes Rée describes promote emancipation, or whether social emancipation in general effects just such changes in our metaphysics.

One way to explore these possibilities is to consider in more detail a philosophical argument in which (contrary to folk metaphysics) the experiences of seeing and hearing, and of speaking and gesturing, are consistently elided. Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception, which suggests that the dawning of visual aspects is akin to experiencing the meaning of spoken or written words, provides an illuminating example, especially since it is articulated in terms of its other, a type of incapacity that Wittgenstein calls aspect blindness. Aspect blindness is a tendency to see without naturally perceiving, an inability to grasp the significance of sensations without analysis. Although his examples of aspect blindness are usually visual, when he tries to convey the nature of this condition, Wittgenstein uses an auditory analogy: 'We say that someone doesn't have a "musical ear", and "aspect-blindness" is (in a way) comparable to this sort of inability to hear.'² Being aspect blind is like being tone deaf.

However, Wittgenstein emphasizes that this inability is not a physical one: 'We say that someone has "the eye of a painter" or "the ear of a musician" but anyone lacking these qualities hardly suffers from a kind of blindness or deafness.'³ The type of blindness and deafness Wittgenstein is talking about requires 'a modified concept of *sensation*':

One might say of someone that he was blind to the *expression* of a face. Would his eyesight on that account be defective? ...

If you feel the seriousness of a tune, what are you perceiving? – Nothing that could be conveyed by reproducing what you hear.⁴

The modification required has two elements. The first is that perceiving an aspect is something different from bare sensation (think of the expression ‘I heard a plaintive melody’; the question is: ‘Does he *hear* the plaint?’). The second is that it is not specific to any sense organ (think of this too: I can only see, not hear, red and green – but sadness I can hear as much as I can see it).⁵ In other



words, the serious expression of the face and the seriousness of a tune are perceived in the same way. Aspect perception is not sense-specific. And since, for Wittgenstein, ‘the importance of this concept lies in the connexion between the concepts of “seeing an aspect” and “experiencing the meaning of a word”’,⁶ it follows that experiencing the meaning of a word is not sense-specific either.

Although *I See a Voice* constitutes a historical refutation of the folk metaphysics in which experience in general and language in particular are taken to be sense-specific, Wittgenstein’s arguments to this effect do not feature. This is a pity because Wittgenstein’s account of aspect perception sheds light on many of the issues Rée discusses, and even on some of the more bizarre episodes in the story. One such anecdote relates to Samuel Heinicke, one of the Germans who pioneered the oral education of the deaf, who on his death left a handwritten *Arkanum* which contained the secret of his educational method:

The secret turns out to consist in associating each vowel with a different flavour, and using a feather to apply appropriate liquids to the tongue: the scale ran from sharp vinegar (corresponding to I), through extract of wormwood (E), pure water (A), and sugar-water (O), down to olive oil (U), with mixtures for diphthongs. Once they had learned the taste of their vowels, Heinicke’s pupils became so accustomed to naming their concepts with sounds, and so delighted with the rapidity and convenience of the practice, that they stopped using gestures altogether and paid the ultimate tribute to his method, by talking in their sleep.

Rée does not seem to take Heinicke’s secret very seriously – noting that even Heinicke’s hagiographer

said that ‘experience has sufficiently shown how far Heinicke erred on this point’ – but there may be more to Heinicke’s method than he allows. If, as Rée later claims, ‘experience, like language, is nothing if not systematic’ in that ‘our primary sense organ ... is our body as a whole’, then the idea of tasting sounds should not be an absurdity at all. And, if you think about it for a moment, Heinicke’s associations between vowels and tastes actually seem just about right: U could never have a vinegary taste because there does seem to be something distinctly oleagenous about the sound (and perhaps even the shape) of the vowel.

But if we feel comfortable with Heinicke’s associations, it may not be because of a natural correspondence of the kind which the inventors of colour harpsichords and colour organs attempted to exploit. The presupposition of inventors like the Jesuit Louis Bertrand Castel was that there was a direct equivalence between colours and tones – Blue for C, Green for D, Yellow for E and so on – and that the direct translation of one into the other would produce a ‘Harpichord for the Eyes’. However, audiences seemed unable to derive pleasure from the resulting performances, let alone pleasure of a distinctly musical kind. Heinicke’s secret was perhaps of a slightly different type, for he was not suggesting that sounds could be directly translated into tastes. (If that were so, one could presumably substitute a carefully prepared meal for a trip to the theatre, without missing much of the plot.) What Heinicke appears to have stumbled upon was something about the flavour of words, something about the way in which language is experienced as having emotional and sensory modalities seemingly quite foreign to its meanings.

This phenomenon, which he termed ‘secondary meaning’, was explored by Wittgenstein as part of his account of aspect perception. He uses an example that might have appealed to Heinicke or Castel:

The secondary sense is not a ‘metaphorical sense. If I say ‘For me the vowel *e* is yellow’ I do not mean ‘yellow’ in a metaphorical sense, – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea ‘yellow’.⁷

However, he is at pains to emphasize that this is not a question of correspondence (‘If someone were *inclined* to say that *e* “corresponds” to yellow and not that it is yellow, wouldn’t he be almost as different from the other as someone for whom vowels and colours are not connected?’⁸) but merely an extreme example of something that is commonplace, namely our tendency to experience meaning of words so physically that they embody both their primary meanings and whatever secondary associations they may have acquired.

This capacity to experience what Wittgenstein calls ‘the familiar physiognomy of a word, the feeling that it has taken up its meaning into itself’⁹ might mean that we experience it as having a colour, or as being ‘fat’ rather than ‘lean’, but these are just visual examples of our sense that words have a particular tone that expresses their meaning. Wittgenstein illustrates this by examples in which he asks us to imagine saying the same word with two different meanings:

Suppose I am learning a language and want to impress upon myself the double meaning of the word ‘bank’, and so I alternately look at a picture of a river bank and then a money bank, and in each case say ‘bank’, or ‘That is a bank’.... if the inflection of voice, for example, seems to me to determine whether I mean one thing or the other – then I would be experiencing meaning.¹⁰

Conversely, just as the same word has a different tone with a different meaning, so that tone cannot easily be replicated by use of another word. As Wittgenstein notes, ‘I cannot, at the drop of a hat, simply utter another word with the same emotional tone.’¹¹

The voice of the deaf

Wittgenstein’s account of the affinity between aspect perception and the experience of meaning, and his emphasis on the tonal and gestural qualities of ordinary linguistic exchange, potentially illuminate the history of the deaf in several ways. In the first place, he offers a model of experience within which, contrary to most accounts of visual experience, the objects are seen as having an aspect, a tone, a face. Whereas we

are accustomed to the idea that sounds are produced by objects (‘the wind in the trees, the clock, the piano, the blackbirds, the conversation, the hum of traffic in the background’), visual sensations are less obviously produced by, or expressive of, things. In aspect perception, our experience in general takes on a character that we usually associate with sound. Just as sound has a tone, so, in Wittgenstein’s account, experience is aspectival. The effect of this is to relocate the voice. If our experience is aspectival or tonal, our experience of the world is as the experience of a voice, continuous, forever modulating in tone, replete with meaning. Perhaps more than any other philosopher, Wittgenstein gives content to the lines from Shakespeare that form Rée’s epigraph:

I see a voice; now will I to the chink,
To spy an I can hear my Thisbe’s face.

For Wittgenstein, these transpositions would be unexceptional: our experience of language is of words that have their own familiar faces; our perception of the world is articulate.

Second, Wittgenstein may help us to explore the relationship between the emancipation of the deaf and other forms of social emancipation. The views that Rée ascribes to folk metaphysics are akin to those which Wittgenstein attributes to the condition of aspect blindness. There is a similar disjunction between subject and object, the same insistence upon the need for the subject to co-ordinate and interpret the experience of the senses, and a shared assumption that language without speech is language without tone. In both cases, the effect is to make the world, and beings within the world who are not identified with the subject, into something faceless, toneless and alien.

In contrast, seeing the world aspectivally involves seeing the world as voiced, accepting it as something more akin to oneself. In the case of any excluded or marginalized group, this is liable to foster a greater sense of identification and an increased receptivity to what they have to say. In short, seeing the world as voiced gives other people within it a greater chance to speak, in the case of the deaf quite literally so. If, however, the deaf were left outside language and community for so long because the hearing population remained, as it were, tone deaf, what exactly was it that they were missing about deafness? It was, presumably, something to do with the deaf being without language, something to do with their relative silence. One of the failings of the aspect blind and the tone deaf is their inability to experience negation as such. Wittgenstein did not address the topic directly, but for anyone

who routinely gathered information by treating words and experiences as raw material for interpretation, an absence of information would mean the discontinuation of interpretative activity. There would just be no more experience to work with, the data would be NOT FOUND as computer programmes sometimes say.

For a long time, the hearing appear to have interpreted the silence of the deaf in just this way, as a simple lack that had no character of its own. But negations do not have to be taken in this way. Rée describes the distinctive quality of silence rather well: 'darkness is dense, thick and full, one might say, whereas silence is sheer expectant emptiness ... a positive absence of sound ... not opaque, but deathly'. But in order to catch the tone of silence like this, as a positive rather than a negative absence of sound, we have to have an experience of the world that is continuous and articulate. We have to see the world as a voice, and so be aware that, like a rest in a line of music, the silence has a meaning of its own.

Perhaps another version of Ulysses and the Sirens is relevant here. According to Kafka, Ulysses was so determined not to succumb to the Sirens' song that he not only had himself chained to the mast but put wax in his own ears as well. As he sailed past the island, the Sirens remained silent, but Ulysses 'did not hear their silence, he believed they were singing and that only he was protected from hearing it'.¹² Although in neither case is any sound to be heard, not hearing the silence is not the same as hearing the silence. However, unlike Kafka's Ulysses, those who failed to hear the silence of the deaf did not suppose the obstruction to be in their own ears. Tone deaf themselves, they had no sense of the contingency of the deaf's exclusion from language, and took them to be dumb. Unable to hear the silence, they could not see the voice.

Notes

1. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, Vintage, New York, 1961, pp. 273–4, 280, 281 and 283.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 1, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, p. 783.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 782.
4. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1958, p. 210.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 209.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 216.
8. Wittgenstein, *Last Writings*, p. 59.
9. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 218.
10. Wittgenstein, *Last Writings*, p. 60.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 713.
12. Franz Kafka, *The Great Wall of China and Other Stories*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1991, p. 101.