Amputating the Hand That Writes – A Critical Reflection

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How does one designate the hand that writes in a corpus that has no tangible limbs, a ‘hand’ that itself has become an annexed offshoot, an operator of ideas now seeded, perhaps, into a different centre of operations, like the self-cloned outcrop of a spider plant? Where is the honoured ‘right hand’ within this new network and what is its status in the age of the ambidextrously typed word? Would amputation render this agent of the archaic written word dumb, or lead to new kinds of spoken language – a new conception of the hand-to-mouth spontaneity of speech?

The task of amputating ‘the hand that writes’ from within the artwork may seem a largely pointless enquiry, stemming from a concept that, whilst elegant in language, is exposed as fanciful when addressed to a four-dimensional, multimedia article rooted in a world of objects and encounters. Like poetry, which renders things feasible through the ‘rightness’ of its expression, the task we face must therefore sit within language itself, working out its consequences through a medium in which anything (linguistically speaking) may happen, so long as the meanings of words can stretch and warp to bridge the gaps.

When Edmond Jabès writes of the silence of the commentary and its attendant question, ‘commentaire?’ we understand that the rambling monologue of the critical text stems precisely from the patient dumbness of the subject it addresses:

“In the night of ‘commentary’, or commentaire, there shines – utter daring or fierce irony? – the proud verb ‘to be silent,’ ” he said. “Any commentary must take off from what is silent in the text, what has knowingly or inadvertently been left unsaid.”

In the work that follows, as we distract ourselves with parlour games of linguistic reasoning, we must nevertheless heed Jabès’ warning and remind ourselves that the mute resistance of the artwork-muse is not born through stupidity – a ‘dumbness’ to be pathologised and spoken for, - but through an intimate knowledge and disciplined mastery of the withheld voice. Learning from its silence we must not be afraid to approach dumb language even now, and let it speak through its perceived banality or irrelevance to the argument at hand. Those gymnastics of rhetoric such as puns and clichés may, in their drift towards slapstick, speak more sense in jest than many an earnest pronouncement, and phrases undeveloped or opaque have far more mileage in their naïve state than those already well-rehearsed that know exactly what they mean to say. Like Socrates, we shall proceed from a position of ignorance, and see where language leads us.

The Hand That Writes/The Right Hand – A Neurologist’s Reading

From the perspective of neurology, the distinction between writing and speaking is less clear cut than one might imagine. Centres of language processing in the left hemisphere of the brain sit side-by-side with those regions determining the handedness of an individual, and the two exhibit a shared history reaching back to the earliest developments in the evolution of man. Current scientific thinking places language and tool manipulation (of which penmanship may be the ultimate example) as mutually supportive prostheses, reciprocally transforming and refining over millions of years to create the perfect double-act of speech and writing.

What triggered this burst of progress in man’s induction into language is, coincidentally, a very literal enactment of amputation in its earliest form: amputation as pruning. The etymology of the word refers to limbs not of articulated (let alone articulate) animals but of trees”, and thus references a more contingent, growth-stimulating cut than the ultimate

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2. This from the Online Etymology Dictionary (http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=amputation):

   amputation: 1610s, “a cutting off of tree branches, a pruning.” also “operation of cutting off a limb, etc., of a body,” from M.Fr. amputation or directly from L. amputationem (nom. amputatio), noun of action from pp. stem of amputare “cut off, lop off; cut around, to prune,” from am(h)- “about” + putare “to prune, trim” (see pave).
decision the word evokes in a contemporary ear. Amputation is not a last resort, nor a depletion of the corpus and its abilities, but rather the opening up of new bifurcations and increased productivity.

Early man’s first forays into language were built upon just one such creative cutting-off, when the transition from quadrupedal to bipedal carriage enabled hands to let go of tree branches, relinquish their role in physical transportation and become freed up for new forms of discovery and exploration, in the grasping of objects that, in time, would become the earliest forms of tools. As manufacture and application of these tools became more sophisticated, requiring the planning and execution of series of consecutive operations, the seeds were sown for the linear sequencing of grammar and man’s running together of discrete noun-verb ideas into flows of argument. Articulation was born of amputation, and communication with a community of Others came only through an initial act of separation from the lived environment; man alienated from his surroundings became man connected to his peers. Letting go of a firm grip on the branch and loosening our comprehension of things as they currently stand (things that can be relied upon and orientated from, rooted into present-day reality as we already understand it,) may initially render once-useful articles loose and superfluous. The hand, hanging loosely at the side of the newly-standing figure, must embrace its own impotence for a short while and learn new tricks in the ignorance opened up through this limp abdication. Language dwells, at its origins, in irresponsibility and irreverence. Language refuses to pull its own weight.

In this attitude of irresponsibility, the right hand in particular becomes the locus for creative risk-tasking and the working-through of curiosity. As early man learns to manufacture stone tools, a push-me pull-you dynamic of stasis and development is established, with the left hand holding still the found object and the right modifying and adapting it to its new function. Over time, the left hand (and thus the right brain hemisphere) specialises to see the ‘bigger picture’, to place things firmly within a context of interconnected relations, whilst the right hand races on ahead - the impatient innovator working quickly, efficiently, through sequences of fine motor control operations that deal with temporality in the here-and-now. Subsequently, it is the precocious left hemisphere, maturing ahead of its more cautious opposite, which becomes the host in which language will take hold. Later, when we consider the hold/operate dual nature of the ventriloquist’s craft, we will be able to consider ambidexterity as a mode of contemporary self-criticality and reflect on what it means for language to talk back or, in common parlance, to bite the hand that feeds it. For now, let us simplify our reasoning to this basic formula: the left hand monitors, the right projects. In this sense, the hand that writes may be diametrically opposed in will and function to the hand that rights, to the hand that puts right and maintains the uprightness of things, sustaining the equilibrium.

So far we have been recapitulating long-established theories of ancient origins to discourse at the dumb object of our critical enquiry. With the neurologists, then, (and no doubt with the endorsement of Jabès,) let us make things more evenly matched and defer instead to the in-fans, to ask a silent witness of the present day what it may have to say of brains and hands and mouths.

The infant, as in-fans, will require a spokesman, naturally. Rhawn Joseph takes the stand:

…the infant first uses the hand to grasp various objects so that they may be placed in the mouth and orally explored. As the child develops, rather than mouthing, more reliance is placed solely on the hand (as well as the visual system) so that information may be gathered through touch and manipulation.

The baby’s first step towards language is, somewhat ironically, a form of gagging. Stopping the mouth with an object that in time will be spoken out instead of taken in, for now the hand is merely a servant-mother figure bringing offerings for the speaker-reader to ingest. Everything that might be said is taken in, understood within the double reading of that phrase.

For now, there is no ‘outside’ to speak of.

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4 Of course, many would contest this and propose that language is, in fact, an agent of alienation from the Other, an argument deserving an essay of its own, and too complex to develop in depth here.

5 For research outlining the theories around brain development discussed in this paragraph, see ‘The Left Hemisphere’, Rhawn Joseph, as above.

6 Ibid.
Pantomiming speech, the infant is content to ‘mouth along’ with objects before the distinction between object and word or even object and the child’s own body has been made. In this pre-Mirror Stage, language can be tasted on the tongue, assessed for tactility and resilience and even assimilated into the body proper, if found suitably yielding. As one body among other bodies, there is every possibility in these very early days that the baby has only the same right to speech as any of the lifeless objects it encounters. These mouthed articles, as dummies, create the templates to which the child will sync its lips and later speak out through the decades as disembodied phantom exhalations. Until this time, the infant continues its rehearsal into language, miming silence.

As the child matures and gains an understanding of knowledge-on-the-outside the mouth is substituted by the hand, which becomes a prosthetic extension of the tongue, digitally prodding and poking to gauge the scope of its new environment. As this distancing becomes more familiar and pronounced so too does the notion of a single, self-contained body; the inside-outside boundaries are drawn and the fingers, once plugged into networks of sensation and nervous feedback, become defined as the body’s abstracted outer limits of knowledge and understanding:

…the instead of predominantly touching, grasping, and holding, the fingers of the hand are used for pointing and then naming the object indicated.7

The pointing finger, suspended in mid-air and distanced from the object it would index, becomes the pattern. The rehearsal of fort:da begins (note how digital thinking has already been compressed to the binary of absence/presence). The mouth forms its first words and objects suddenly vanish from the scene. The word, both ‘here’ and ‘gone’, provides the only remaining bridge between an inside-outside that has thrown itself far away from bodily experience and interiority of thought. Everything is on the outside as language becomes (in the becoming of its very nature) hysterical. All speaking, beyond silence, is a being-beside-oneself in language. The hand, in speech, becomes a numb, residual limb once more.

Odd Couples and the Right-Left Divide

Rather unfashionably, we have found ourselves faced with a binary. I suppose it comes of having two hands.

What, we may ask, will be the future of left-hemisphere/right-hand dominance in linguistic thought in the age of QWERTY, as cursive writing becomes a rarer art and the hand typically resorts to a more literally ‘digital’ practice? Understanding creativity through the ambidextrous model of anything goes, the opposition of gestalt view versus practical application - meta-critique and working-through - may no longer hold true. Instead of dialogical reasoning built on the principle of ‘on one hand’ and ‘on the other’, the sole criterion for alternative views may be decided on the mechanical avoidance of jamming in the system. The two hands of the typist, working together, replace the regulatory stability of ‘monitor/project’ (the left hand holding still the page, the right recasting it in language,) with a shared concern for flow and rhythm.8 Within a textual argument, voices of agreement and dissension may no longer be attributable to discrete, clearly articulated positions, but rather drift from rhetorical figure to figure. Whilst there may still be two hands, two operatives, their voices are both one and many, shared and footloose. The key concern is to keep things moving at a steady pace. The articulation that matters is no longer that between self-contained bodies with distinct psychologies and desires but within the flow of language itself, as it dances on the keyboard and appears, phantasmically, on the screen.

Ambidexterity as a term is not entirely sympathetic to this new two-handed conception of the text. This dubbing of two-handedness does not describe two uniquely qualified, parallel elements but rather a reflection and reiteration of the right onto the left – a mere doubling of the hand that writes. The ambi-dextrous individual, so says the English dictionary, is the proud possessor of two right hands.

7 Ibid.

8 The right hemisphere of the brain’s engagement with language is chiefly through the processing of its musical, non-lexical components (see Rhawn Joseph, as above). It therefore seems somewhat fitting that the technology of the typewriter, in giving voice to the left hand (and, in fact, priority, as many more words are executed by the left hand than the right,) had to accommodate this rhythmical dimension of the written word in the pragmatic considerations of its very construction. The left-hemisphere linear sequencing of the alphabet (abc…) had to be rearranged into a new spatial configuration to prevent the jamming of the keys, and a steady, stable rhythm is considered an important quality of competent typing.
Remembering our parlour games, we recall the absurdities inherent in arguments built from language. Here, you say, is a man of exceeding technical ability – he has two right hands, two hands that write – an upstanding gentleman and skilled to boot! Here, on the other hand, is a man entirely lacking in both grace and coordination. He is all over the place.

What, bar ancient prejudices of left and right, distinguishes the man with two right hands from his counterpart, the unfortunate saddled with two left feet?

Coordination is linked to mastery. First the infant is capable only of shaping its lips around the objects it encounters; later it will be congratulated on speaking back their names, just as it learns to catch a ball and throw it back again. Things must match up and agree. Symmetry, our brains are wired up to believe, is beautiful and right. We watch someone fall flat onto their face. The mirror neurons start firing, furiously.

The man with two left feet is lumbered with both a surplus and a lack, and plays out the game of fort:da in full-bodily displacement. The pratfall, whilst excessive, is nevertheless a falling short, a failure, and scripts itself according to the same template of there-and-gone as the far more serious pursuit of mourning, which depends as much on the agony of remaining as the pain of loss. Marshall McLuhan, writing of ‘autoamputation’ and extensions of the self, draws a classic analogy on this very point:

There is a close parallel of response between the patterns of physical and psychic trauma or shock. A person suddenly deprived of loved ones and a person who drops a few feet unexpectedly will both register shock. Both the loss of family and a physical fall are extreme instances of amputations of the self [...] The victim seems immune to pain or sense.

A physical fall that momentarily disorients the body and suspends it in mid-air as if a pointed finger (the body turned to that!) leaves its victim dumbfounded and reverting to the sensibility of the in-fans with the reel. Fort:da, in its earliest, mythical incantation, tries to pre-empt and protect against the numbness that will come when separation from the mother cannot be put right with a simple tug on the string. But all this is forgotten when the tripped body, falling to earth, is sent reeling. The tongue is tied; no rehearsal can prepare for when these things get out of hand. But if we listen carefully, another kind of numbness threatens to steal the show from McLuhan’s voiceless argument. The pun, unsubtle and crass, resonates jarringly through the passage like a stifled burst of laughter at a funeral. As Avital Ronell comments on this specific extract,

it remains unclear as to how much control the author exercises over his rhetoric: the statement about dropping feet comes in the context of autoamputation...

McLuhan appears to have been caught out by an unfortunate slip of the [paper] tongue, resulting in an unwittingly staged event of textual slapstick. Slapstick, however, as all comedians know, is not crafted from a misfit moment but rather the choreography of hyper-coordination, when things fall into step slightly too successfully. It is not that McLuhan, as the man with two left feet, is mismatched in his phraseology, but rather that he marries idiom to context far too well in an embarrassing coincidence of surplus symmetry. When he writes of dropping feet, there are at least, we reason, two hands writing.

James Krasner will develop this same concept of mourning and physical absurdity in his essay, Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief. Using the example of Mr. Ramsay’s widowed disorientation in To the Lighthouse, Krasner writes,

The mourner becomes a child again, learning to walk, reaching for a hand he does not find, stumbling through unexpected emptiness, and (if anyone is watching) embarrassing himself.

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11 In PMLA, Vol. 119, No. 2 (March 2004), pp.218-232
It is as if in grief we revert to a state of infancy, just as the body under threat resorts to a limbic, fight-or-flight engagement with its surroundings. In both cases, we are caught scrabbling back up the family tree, wrong footed by the unexpected cut that exposes us as rootless. Grief and shock make crawling, speechless figures of us; the hand that writes is blunted back to the purpose of a would-be foot.

If this is an absurd image, then perhaps it is worthwhile considering just what ‘absurdity’ means. Now we think primarily of the surd as a quantity that is inexpressible in terms of a fraction – an irrational number (here we return to our ‘odd couple’) that cannot understand itself in terms of articulation into parts. It is, in some sense, an orphan entity, begotten of no one. But if one searches in the forking of its lexical past and takes a cutting, an old meaning can restore itself – that of the silent, mute or dumb.[12] McLuhan’s second ‘foot’ is problematic specifically because it steps just aside of silent obedience to the point at hand. Ab-surdity, then, is our off-silence.

The director asks for quiet on the set. He shuts the clapperboard; the cameras roll.

So the man with two right hands or two left feet is the star of physical comedy in mime, crafting asymmetrical, limping clumsiness from the artfully disguised skill of perfect co-ordination. Off-screen, however, a second figure will attend to add an extra, aural element to the mix. Composed of two sticks hinged together at one end the slapstick, with its operation correctly timed, provides an auditory complement to the collisions and collapses of the silent farce. The stage hand, armed and looking on, displaces the actors’ blows onto a substitute wooden body that will speak painlessly from the outside-in. It is this slap, executed on the side, that will bring the hysteria of the action round to sense.

In 1926 the art form adopts the name of the tool that serves it, and dubs itself, metonymically, ‘slapstick’.[13] Just as the baby mouths the dummy, the comedian takes on the name of the object that gives his actions voice, and in so doing splits word and object, retaining one to carry far away, leaving the other to remain a forgotten trinket, cast aside as useless on the nursery floor. The aural/actual partnership is broken, and the orphaned word, with many others, becomes the sound of one hand clapping.

Returning briefly to our theme of amputation, it is time to recall neurology with some consideration of the phantom limb. (If we are to consider amputating the hand that writes, it is only reasonable to weigh up the consequences of this critical cut.) Krasner has already considered tackling this feat, as he writes, single-handedly:

> The suffering caused by phantom limbs derives not from the loss but from the sufferer’s belief in the limb’s enduring presence […] Like Mr. Ramsay, amputees move their bodies in the old way even though their world has changed […] The body registers the dissonance between these two abnormalities [‘abnormally present’ and ‘abnormally absent’] as pain, which may be avoided through contortions.[15]

If the hand that writes recalls names divorced from objects, it is liable to forget that everything, now, is ‘fort’. Without the object in attendance to speak back and correct the projections of the precocious right hand with its solid, problematic presence, linguistic reasoning risks becoming more and more distorted, shaping the phantoms of once-rooted things into increasingly fantastical formulations. Embedded firmly within the lexical realm, words will flex and contort at will to fill the gaps where previously things performed, weighty and substantial. And when this agency is displaced farther from hand to mouth, when ethereal speech takes over from the tool-enabled hand, the right hand gestures on, sketching its hypothetical objects in thin-air, indexing them, still, in their absence:

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12 Ibid, p.227

13 Etymology of *surd*, as laid out in the OED:

**ORIGIN** Latin *surdus* deaf, silent, mute (of sound etc.) dull, indistinct. Sense 1 ult. from translation of Greek *alogos* not expressible, irrational, through Arabic *jadr asamm* lit. ‘deaf root’. (The notion of the ‘deaf root’ seems especially apt, given our listening-out for the now muted etymological origins of words, our irrational cuts into linguistic units to fetch up meanings both ancestral and new-born.)


15 Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs, p.226
…the evolution of language and linguistic thought are related to and are the outgrowth of right hand and left hemisphere temporal-sequential motor activity…

[The infant rehearse languages, throwing the toys out of its cot]

…This linkage accounts for why individuals often gesture with the right hand when they speak […] We predominantly use the right hand for waving goodbye, throwing a kiss, delivering a vulgar gesture, greeting etc. The right hand appears to serve as a kind of motoric extension of language and thought in that it acts at the behest of linguistic impulses via parietal lobe programming. [16]

The hand that writes becomes the hand that speaks, reiterating the mouth at a displaced distance. Hand and mouth validate each other, confirming a symmetry that places the mirror between speech and speech and keeps the object firmly out of the reflection. In this virtual reality the hand is both, paradoxically, the body proper of the speaker and a disembodied projection of speech, both there and gone, both tool and operation. The hand is both inside and outside the space of speech.

The phantom limb, then, positions itself directly on the threshold of fort:da [17], inhabiting the territory of the colon, which is neither as finite an articulation of parts as the full stop, nor as continuous a linkage as ellipsis. The colon is a short circuit, a cutting out (or amputation?) of the argument to reduce it to its most basic dialogical exchange, and the phantom limb which resides there is situated, like the linguistic argument, on the possibility opened up when this two-way conversation breaks down and the monitoring presence of an ‘Other’ remains silent.

A conventional phantom limb (one that does not cause the patient pain) is a fabulation of the fully-working brain projected onto the no longer ‘total’ body, the brain engaging in the same sense-making contributions from elsewhere as the stage hand wielding the slapstick in the wings. The arrangement is as follows. The brain recalls the amputated limb through its respective neural centres, which remain intact. These operate as if the limb were still attached, sending motor commands to a now-absent member which cannot return the call. However, the right parietal lobe which deals with total body image (this, remember, being the ‘left-hand’ monitor that maintains the equilibrium and keeps things steady) steps in, having also received the command. A phantom recollection of how this action would look is fed back, and the command centre is satisfied that the task has been achieved – the patient will explain that his now-missing hand is moving, answering telephones, and waving to greet visitors. [18]

The phantom limb only becomes a problem when it is in pain. This pain, residing in a ghost-member, cannot be treated, for how could one massage or operate on something that is merely a mental projection, which has no physical manifestation that could be manipulated and put right? There is no Other to defer to for evidential confirmation – the patient is trapped inside his own head, unable to counteract its readings with a voice from elsewhere. Phantom pain becomes a despotic monologue that will not (because it cannot) listen to sense.

Treatment of phantom limb pain necessitates the staging of a false dialogue to create a truly ambidextrous conversation. A mirror is placed between the phantom limb and its still-present partner so that the reflection casts an optical doppelganger onto the site of pain. If we were to use the example of an amputated right hand (for simplicity’s sake), the mirror would reflect the left, which, when viewed from the correct angle by the patient, would sit perfectly in place of its troublesome opposite. By mimicking the position of the right (phantom) hand with the left, the brain finally receives an answer to its call-to-arms – the phantom does, apparently, exist. Now it can be moved and flexed from its paralysed position, and the cramp relieved. The eye and the left hand together collude to ventriloquise the hand that writes, which, in time placated, will quieten down and settle into obscurity, no longer with a point to prove.

End of scene. The [mis]director makes the cut.

This is the purpose of the clapperboard: to ensure that things are synchronised so as to make perfect sense. The moment of incision at which the blades close will become the grafting-point of sound and image, which run parallel to each

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[16] ‘The Left Hemisphere’ [as above]

[17] As an aside, it is interesting to consider that both ‘fort’ and ‘da’ are separations from the body. At this early stage of language, even the ‘there’ of ‘da’ is recognised as a projection from the total ‘here-ness’ of the object in the mouth. Both elements of speech testify to alienation from the self-contained body; it is more a matter of relative proximity, or of evidential proof, on which the game hinges.

[18] For an explanation of this neurology that will be developed further in the next few paragraphs, see HARDtalk - Stephen Sackur talks to VS Ramachandran, BBC News Channel (first broadcast 27th April 2011)
other, confirming their veracity through the redundancy of repetition. Each backs the other up, reinforcing the old rumour that things that are repeated must be true. The cameraman winds back the reel.

_Mis-[s]hearing the Hand That Speaks_

We are still no closer to deciding where to make our critical cut. The simple left/right: monitor/project binary has refracted into numerous combinations - the hand that writes or rights, the hand that speaks, the two-right-hands/two-left-feet and even the hand-that-is-no-longer-there. The two hands typing have had their way, evidently, with the direction of this text.

With all this consideration of split personalities within the hand/mouth relationship, then, and the ‘thrown’ nature of the object/language pairing in fort:da, it is time to consider in more depth the deliberate schizophrenic strategies of the ventriloquist, who, like the writer-theorist, conjures an internal ‘critical distance’ with which to stage a dialogue of parts.

Let us first, in this consideration, retrace our reference to the hand that speaks. On the most basic level the ventriloquist’s dummy is a glove puppet that transforms the multi-modal dexterity of the digits into a simple upper-jaw/lower-jaw hinge distinction. Shutting the mouth (and silencing the dummy) is therefore achieved through a gripping action which, without too much imagination on our part, could be seen as a direct descendant of the grasping that saw early man swing through the forests from branch to branch. Here, that amputated dendrite branch of man’s development has become a phantom limb which speech holds on to still in its moments of muteness. Those split-seconds of mutual silence in the ventriloquist’s act (where neither dummy nor vent is speaking, both mouths being closed) are the points of passage where the journey from one speech centre to another can be made; the transportation of the voice from mouth to mouth (which, in reality, is an internal journey of the reconfiguring muscles) is made when both hand and mouth revert to a time before speech.

The ventriloquist does everything in his power to minimise these points of silent passage in his act. The quicker the transitions can be made, the closer the ‘conversation’ will come to the nature of true dialogue, which is built on rhythms of interruption and the simultaneous negotiation of ideas between participants. The skilled ventriloquist must underplay the articulation of his act and instigate instead confusion, becoming an imperfect orator to disguise, like the slapstick star, the well-timed mastery of his art.

Part of this projected ‘two left feet’ clumsiness stems from the scripted device of dummy and vent mishearing each other. Besides, of course, the comic potential to be had from playing on the audience’s awareness that mishearing is impossible when all speech ultimately derives from the single figure of the vent (who, we shall assume, knows what he’s talking about), this reiteration has a very practical application in presenting the act in the strongest light. When words become important in the build up to a punch line, the ventriloquist cannot risk the audience missing a vital component of the joke. Imperfectly ventriloquised pronunciation can easily be patched up with a simple, _What do you mean, [insert repeated phrase here]?_ The audience is (one hopes) willing to play along, and suggestible – the ventriloquist can, to some extent, dictate to them what they have heard, and put the story right.

So far in our discussions of eyes and mouths and hands we have largely overlooked the ear, and now, when it does take centre stage, we are only interested in listening to it negligently and aslant. As irresponsible as this sounds, however, the ventriloquist’s tactic of employing [secretly non-redundant repetition and wilful mishearing is of every value to us as we think through the hand that speaks and ventriloquial approaches to the critical, typed text.

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19 The same is true of stop-frame animation, whose seeming progress actually relies on the moments of stasis (and, not entirely irrelevantly, blindness) that break it into discrete parts. The hand is still in push-me pull-you mode: holding onto successive branches may insert moments of stability into movement, but it is paradoxically only through these static fixatures that the movement itself can be achieved. Here arises one of the key conundrums of articulation: the ‘articulate’ person is one who appears fluent and expressive in speech, but appears this way precisely through their ability to measure, pace and compartmentalise their argument and, most simply of all, their words. The speaker who slurs and garbles, switching tack mid-sentence, is considered very far from fluent, as is the speaker who chucks his words and expressions into such isolated packages that the sense of the statement can no longer be followed. Mastery in both animation and oratory, it seems, is achieved through the almost-nothingness of stasis, when stillness is reduced to its absolute minimum and illusorily experienced as its own absence. We are presiding, at this moment, at the point where inanimate objects come to life, directly on the colon of fort:da.
Firstly, the ventriloquist’s mishearing is a means of allying himself with the audience, on the side of not knowing what will be said. Camping himself firmly within the domain of the right hand/left hemisphere (absorbed within the here-and-now progression of the verbal act), he dissembles an amputation from that part of him which sets the anarchy upright within a plotted narrative/comic resolution arc. Feigning surprise and appearing to think on his feet, wandering down (planned) deviations from the topic, the ventriloquist inhabits an inside/outside position on the performance – being both the actor and the audience, understanding and embodying the motivations of each, his performance is more convincing and able to absorb real detours (slips of the tongue, heckles) into his shtick. The ventriloquist, concealing his mastery, makes it appear that the left hand doesn’t know what the right is doing so that, should anything truly unforeseen arrive, he has at least two fronts on which to tackle it.

Stephen Connor, writing of ventriloquism through Freudian theories of repression, says the following of speech and hearing:

In speaking, we listen intently to our own speaking voice, in a complicated feedback loop, or duet of utterance and response; we eavesdrop on our own speech, but we do not, as it were, hear ourselves listening.

The difference, then, between the ventriloquist and the average speaker is the consciousness with which this second tier of listening is attended to. The first form, in which we all engage, is one that monitors and instantly feeds back corrections to that part of us which speaks, ushering in concessions, qualifications and rephrasings to keep a stable, single voice in check. The ventriloquist, however, steps outside of this listening and, in an act of deliberate self-criticality, attempts to undo the self-containment of the voice, drawing attention to its wavering and the mixed motives that always betray the fact that more than one voice is speaking. The ventriloquist and dummy are, to some extent, simply an exploded diagram of the self-critical position, where the analyst is always writing with (and simultaneously pointing to) at least two hands.

The ventriloquist, some would conclude, is sick, inhabiting and exhibiting a body that has stopped seeing itself as whole and self-contained, since its self-perception is disoriented by hallucination and double-vision. Jacques Derrida, defining the pathology of illness in La Parole Soufflée, will diagnose the condition as follows:

…as is said of those who are ill, the body listens to itself and, thus, disconcerts itself.

The Otherness and objecthood with which the ventriloquist endows his speech set him apart as an invalid within the field of entertainers. He listens to his speech as a wounded man looks on his damaged limb as something problematic which asserts itself as oddly present and disobedient to its owner’s will. Things no longer hold together quite so well. The ventriloquist’s voice has become dis-membered.

20 Crucially, in most ventriloquist performances it is the dummy that gains the upper hand in such situations as these. Often diffusing the situation with a quip to put things right, its ‘edgy’ voice (given excuse by the exaggerated premise of its character), is less restrained than the long-suffering and apologetic vent, and thus more immediate and unabashed in its comebacks. The dummy’s relation to ‘monitoring’ therefore operates on two levels. What it says in the instant of retort is largely unmodified, deaf to its own internal censorship (the dummy, almost by definition, stands outside of self-censorship, not least because, as an inanimate object, it has no ‘selfhood’ or conscience with which to censor), cut off from a feedback loop that would moderate the content. But taking in a wider view, this seemingly uncontrolled outburst is itself a regulating force that monitors the larger situation (the drunk and abusive audience member, the mechanical glitch that holds up the performance) and assimilates it into the body of the act. The dummy, as monitor, therefore maintains the stability of the status-quo specifically through its own anarchic, destabilising presence.


23 Detouring briefly to think of Socrates and Plato, the ultimate speech-writing double-act, it seems hardly surprising that when Plato absents himself as author from the scene it is also on the premise of an illness (see Plato, Phaedo, tr. Benjamin Jowett, The Internet Classics Archive http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/phaedo.1b.txt) Plato the writer experiences his body in disarray as he tries to ventriloquise his long-dead teacher onto the page. As a result, it is to be expected that all his dialogues may have something of the hysterical about them.
Staging a distinction between two hands that write and viewing the resultant language through a stereoscopic lens creates a gap between intention and execution that can be hijacked by misreadings and interference. The ventriloquist-theorist knows this well and pre-empts his audience by listening-in, with them, on these exchanges. He understands that misunderstanding generates new material and wouldn’t want to miss his cue. (The prompt is whispering urgently in the wings.) The repetition of the argument or phrase is therefore not so much a rehearsal of redundancy or emphatic reassertion of the facts as an opportunity to mishear things anew, the setting in place of an elaborate game of Chinese Whispers. The act and its concerns will develop through the will of language itself as it forces its hand through the misappropriations of self-perpetuated rumour and hearsay. The ear and mouth together rewrite the edicts of the right hand, and both right and left are left to juggle these new formulations through the complex feedback loops of monitor:project, absorbing interruptions into an ever-new, assimilative conception of the body as a whole which continues splintering and regrouping with each abjected phrase.

The ventriloquist, while a virtuoso of the disassembled voice,24 is therefore nevertheless simultaneously engaged in acts of highly consummate synthesis. Thinking back to our left hand/right hand distinction of hold/operate (or monitor:project), the ‘dummy’ hand (most frequently the right) must become, on its own, a double agent, both holding the puppet upright and operating its internal levers to convincingly bring ‘le mort’25 to life. In this way, the right hand comes to appear capable of presenting a self-supporting argument by itself, and the left, cast onto the outside (for somehow the ventriloquist always seems the slightly superfluous partner of the dummy, and not vice versa), can only add supplementary addenda and aside. It is not uncommon, even, for the character of the dummy to present itself as a would-be stand-up comedian, confident that it can hold the floor in comic monologue without its dead-weight vent. This asymmetrical reading reminds us of the dangers inherent in treating ventriloquism as a superficial analogue of critical theory. Were we to see the role of the commentary as merely an additional tier of monitoring (a second, surplus left hand) in the service of an already self-contained and fully rounded self-critical subject, the entire exercise would be rendered pointless, limp and paralysed. We must always keep in mind the ongoing tension between the exposed commentary and the gloved and realise that their mutual dependence requires the same levels of concentration and coordination as someone rubbing their belly and patting their head at the same time. Appetite and reward go hand-in-hand: the commentary demands new nourishment from its subject as much as it affirms that which it has already been provided with. The subject, reanimated and spoken-through, speaks back, presenting its own demands to suit the shifted situation. The feedback loop is circular, the conversation a two-hander.

The optimum modality of the commentary, we may therefore speculate, may be situated precisely in that moment of collapse when the puppeteer gets an itch and, without thinking, automatically raises his right hand to scratch.

The audience, ambidextrously, applauds.

_Tying Things Up – The Tourniquet_

The initial analogy of the spider plant which squatted under-thought and hypothetical at this text’s introduction appears, in the end, to have been a telling premonition of the work to come. From the two hands typing who sprouted numerous offshoots of mutant, hybrid limbs that in turn have seeded other regions of research which promise, with careful husbandry, whole networks of extended feelers of their own. The centre shifts with each new outcrop of the argument, but the binary of left and right remains, problematic and resolute, even amongst its own intermingling bifurcations and

24 We should, at this moment, be prepared to listen aslant for the ‘dissembling’ of the disassembled voice, and aware that opening up the monitor:project feedback loop to public scrutiny is no guarantee of a more critically ‘honest’ dialogue. The ventriloquist is a showman first and foremost, after all.

25 In French the dummy is ‘le mort’ (= the dead), a term that Jacques Lacan will use to describe the psychoanalytic position adopted by the silent analyst to draw speech from the analysand (for discussion of this concept see Anika Lemaire, _Jacques Lacan_, tr. David Macey, Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, Boston & Henley 1977, pp.217-219). This tactic of withdrawal from speech is complicated by its function as a form of openness, equivalent to the dummy hand in a game of bridge, through which the other players may better gauge the strength of their own hand and determine the contents of each other’s. The analyst-as dummy ‘play[s] dead’ (ibid, p.217), but contiguous with this deception is the suggestion of the honesty involved in putting one’s cards on the table, showing one’s hand. As in the very structure of the ventriloquial performance, then, the psychoanalytic session (or ‘séance’) is built on the dual operation of deception and open exhibition. As Stephen Connor writes, ‘the [ventriloquist’s] audience is not so much in the situation as _in on it_’ (Dumbstruck, p.229); the audience, with the ventriloquist, inhabits the space of the colon that bridges inside/outside knowledge, in a voluntary entry into self-deception. Everyone it seems (not least the psychoanalyst) is engaged together in this game of wilful mishearing.
The reader, tied in knots, is left waiting for the Alexandrian cut with which an artificial end may be contrived if a natural, pre-existing one cannot be found and teased loose from all that may have gone before. As the typist’s fingers work furiously at the matter, we may as well prepare the tourniquet.

The tourniquet prevents the two-way flow of information from continuing, disrupts the circuit, and sections off that which it intends to stop, ushering in preliminary numbness before the final cut. But, speaking with two tongues and ventriloquising Gérard Genette, the tourniquet is also a revolving door, the very mechanism by which exchange between two positions (most commonly inside/outside) is effected. The tourniquet, then, in many senses, is the same portal of the colon in for:da that we have been negotiating, perilously and circuitously, throughout. We have, it transpires, only ever been operating in this ante-chamber to the cut, to the moment when we emerge from the argument (be it one way or the other) and, blinking and disorientated, find our feet in a space outside the text. For as long as we have been in language, we have only ever been rehearsing our departure.

Our endeavour to choose a site of amputation, we find, retrospectively, was never really focused on the so-called mute object of our enquiry after all. Rather, this effort was the self-authoring, self-executing linguistic game by which the text itself was written and through which it will, quite shortly, close. It was never so much, we realise, a question of working out how to amputate the hand that writes, but rather how to write the site of amputation; how to present a body of research from which a final, vital cut to silence could be made. Now, at the end of a roundabout and inconclusive argument, we may as well make our decisive, if somewhat arbitrary, cut. We pull the cords tight, ready to cast off.

Jennifer Jarman,
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26 - Alexander the Great famously solving the problem of the Gordian knot by creating his own loose ends with a stroke of his sword. (For a description of this legend and discussion of its various interpretations see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordian_Knot)

Bibliography


