Articulating a Deaf Identity: Education, Poetry, and the Deaf Experience (1827-1914)

Introduction

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, American educators fiercely debated the best methods for teaching deaf and mute students. Educators were divided between a manual system in which signs and hand gestures were used to communicate, and an oral system where students were taught to read lips and to speak. Advocates for the use of American Sign Language, otherwise known as the manual system, were often deaf themselves. The oralists, most of whom were hearing, alternatively believed that deaf students should be taught only to read lips and to speak. The first American schools for the deaf, opened around 1817, were modeled after European schools and used almost exclusively manual instruction. However, by 1880, a group of educators had begun to question what had been, at least from the perspective of deaf students and instructors, an effective and enjoyable system. Oralists questioned the merits of signing as a language and its suitability in the classroom, thus setting off what Jennifer Esmail has described as the "Nineteenth-Century Sign Language Debates"—debates that ended with oralist victory and the suppression of sign language in the classroom. In this essay, I will focus on the role that "vocal culture," a system of societal values that prioritized rhetoric and oration, played in the oralist’s success. Additionally, I will examine the vocal nature of nineteenth-century poetry and its role as a battleground for deaf and manualist resistance. The mere act of writing engaged deaf

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1 It is common practice within today's fields of Deaf studies and Disability studies to make a distinction between Deaf (uppercase) and deaf (lowercase). James Woodward first employed the capital letter in 1972 to denote people who identify as culturally Deaf—that is, they identify as part of the community of people who celebrate their Deafness and do not identify it as a disadvantageous condition. The lowercase, deaf, is used to refer simply to the audiological condition of hearing loss. However, within the scope of this paper (1827-1914), the Deaf identity as such was still in the process of being formed. Many of the poets discussed in this paper struggled with their condition. Attempting to characterize whether or not groups of people and specific poets would have identified as deaf or Deaf is nearly impossible, and would oversimplify an individual's complex and personal journey. Therefore, in this paper I will simply use the lowercase term, unless specifically referring to the Deaf identity in contemporary use.
poets in the debates over education, and the concurrent debates over whether or not deaf people were capable of writing poetry. I will argue that deaf poets John Carlin, James Nack, Laura Redden Searing, and Angeline Fuller Fischer developed a preliminary sense of a communal deaf identity as a response to those two debates. My research demonstrates an important cultural connection between education, poetry, and the conception of deaf identity.

... Poetic Culture and Deaf Writers

In the late 19th century, poetic culture was intimately connected with vocal culture in that the dominant theory of poetry stressed recitation and performance of poetry. Most poetry of the period used rigid rhyme schemes and meter, and was written with the intent of being read aloud. In his 1892 article, "What is Poetry?" Edmund Clarence Stedman commented on, among other topics, the nature of poetry as essentially rhythmic and vibratory: “vibrations, and nothing else, convey through the body the look and voice of nature of the soul” (52). Stedman also claims that true poets are born, not made:

Equally true is it that natural poets in sensitive moods have this gift of choice and rhythmic assortment, just as a singer is born with voice and ear, or a painter with a knack of drawing likenesses before he can read or write. It is not too much to say that if not born with this endowment he is not a poet: a poetic nature, if you choose, —indeed, often more good, pure, intellectual, even more sensitive, than another with the 'gift,' — and, again, one who in time by practice may excel in rhythmical mechanism him that has the gift but slights it; nevertheless, over and over again, not a born poet, not of the total breed that by warrant roam the sacred groves. (53)

Stedman's work guided the thinking of a whole generation of poets, but the rigid limits of this
definition would seem to exclude deaf writers. Another popular theory of poetry, espoused by Edgar Allen Poe, connected poetry to music. “Contenting myself with the certainty that music, in its various modes of metre, rhythm, and rhyme, is of so vast a moment in poetry as never to be wisely rejected—is so vitally important an adjunct that he is simply silly who declines its assistance—I will not now pause to maintain its absolute essentiality” (Poe, qtd. in “The Poetry of the Deaf” 200). It would not be until much later that the culture of poetry would become accepting of breaks with formal tradition. During the late nineteenth century, for a poem to be a popular and critical success, it had to adhere to specific set of traditions and rules.

Based on this rigid definition of poetry, many mainstream critics questioned whether or not poetry by deaf writers could even exist. Critics were shocked upon learning that John Carlin, who was congenitally deaf, or deaf since his birth, had produced poetry. Critics found it easy to believe that poets who were deafened later in life, and who thus had some experience with sound, could easily produce poetry with "a good degree of merit" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 14). But when the American Annals of the Deaf, and Dumb, a journal for educators of deaf students, printed a poem by the congenitally deaf Carlin in 1847, an editor’s note preceded the poem and discussed this "very different" case. He or she expressed surprise and disbelief. "How shall he who has not now, and who never has had the sense of hearing; who is totally without what the musicians call an 'ear;' succeed in preserving all the niceties of accent, measure and rhythm? We should almost as soon expect a man born blind to become a landscape painter as one born deaf to produce poetry of even tolerable merit" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 14), the editor writes. Carlin’s work threatened to undermine the very definition of poetry as vocal and musical. Significantly, the metaphor of painting (which also recalls Stedman’s definition of a poet) repeats over and over in the discussion of poetry and the deaf, proving that
mainstream critics were not allowing their ideas about poetry to evolve or become more inclusive. In 1881, Sidney Lanier, author of *Science of the English Verse*, wrote on how the deaf might learn poetry. He imagined a process of teaching rhythm through the visualization of syllables, but he still stubbornly claimed that the deaf would never fully master poetry because of their disadvantage. He offers yet another painting metaphor:

This subject is quite analogous to the conception of a complex painting by a man always blind. He could obtain some primary ideas of the forms in the painting; but of the different hues, the lights and shades, the values, the effects of related colors, he could not, by any possibility, have the least conception in the absence of that sense which is the prime originator, or, at least, channel, of such ideas (Lanier, qtd. in "Miscellaneous: The Poetic Sensibilities of the Deaf." 261).

Despite clear evidence that it was possible for a congenitally deaf person to produce poetry, and technically sound poetry at that, many critics remained skeptical. Even as they confronted the evidence of a deaf poet's ability and reluctantly allowed for this new possibility, many critics still described poetry with the same narrow definitions. Their position was simple, and backed up by ears of scholarship: poetry was *inherently* vocal and musical. The contributions of a few deaf poets would not so easily cause them to re-examine that definition.

**Poetry as Resistance: The Other Side of the Debate**

Advocates for the deaf such as Edward Miner Gallaudet took up a different opinion, arguing that poetry written by the deaf was not only a possibility, but a flourishing and substantial reality. The major task for critics like Gallaudet was, it seemed, simply to prove that deaf poets were active and capable writers. Gallaudet published an article in *Harper's Magazine*, reprinted in an 1884 issue of *The American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*, challenging Poe's claim that poetry was
dependent on the influence of music. Gallaudet questions this idea because it is inherently exclusionary to the deaf. "If this dictum of so great a master of the music of verse is accepted, the declaration that poetry may be fully appreciated, and even produced, by those bereft of the sense through which alone music can be enjoyed, presents an apparent absurdity" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 200), Gallaudet writes. In his article, he provides biographies of numerous deaf poets, including John Carlin, James Nack, John R. Burnet, Howard Glyndon (Laura Redden Searing), Mary Toles Peet, William L. Bird, and Laura Bridgman. Gallaudet explains each poet’s experience of deafness, focusing specifically on whether they were born deaf or deafened later in their life. Gallaudet then prints excerpts of their work, occasionally analyzing its literary and formal merit. "The interesting fact appears that the deaf, in no inconsiderable numbers, have essayed to mount on the wing of poetic expression" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 201), Gallaudet writes. "We leave this to the reader, contenting ourselves with having made what we believe to be a unique collection of writings by representatives of a peculiar and most interesting class of persons—a class hitherto commanding little attention in the world of letters, but destined, we feel assured, with increasing advantages afforded it, to contribute in the future its due share to the aggregate of intellectual production" ("The Poetry of the Deaf" 220). Gallaudet, then, made great strides to convince the hearing world that deaf poetry was not an anomaly, but a genre that should be appreciated and valued. Ultimately, however, the work of the deaf poets themselves would prove the worth and literary merit of their poetry and identities.

The simple act of writing and publishing poetry engaged deaf poets in this debate over poetry: their work, formally and technically sound, served as evidence of a deaf person's abilities and skills and allowed them entrance into the medium. Many deaf poets displayed a mastery of all the proposed hallmarks of poetry: despite expressing his disbelief at Carlin's abilities, the
editor of *Annals* did offer a few words of praise for it. The editor says, "It is now published precisely as it came from his own hand. We have not felt ourselves at liberty to add, subtract, or change the position of a single word. Mr. Carlin sometimes employs rhyme as well as blank verse in his poetical efforts" ("The Poetry of the Deaf and Dumb" 15). Deaf poets, in order to participate in the debates and prove their abilities, made sure to do so within the rigid poetic tradition of the time. John Carlin, in a short autobiographical sketch, admitted his own insecurities about the limits of his deafness. Because he was born deaf, he had absolutely no conception of sound; a case different to that of many other deaf poets, who lost their hearing later in life. He mentions his initial difficulties mastering rhyme and rhythm, and how this almost thwarted his earliest poetic attempts. At a friend's suggestion, Carlin taught himself to write poetry by studying John Walker's *Rhyming Dictionary* and *Pronouncing Dictionary*, large volumes that included lists of "allowable rhymes" and arranged groups of words by their terminations and explained the English language's "orthography" or unique peculiarities. Using sight rhyme, Carlin was able to create poems that were just as formally effective as those by hearing writers. This was the beginning of a trend that would continue throughout deaf poetry in the late nineteenth century. Though their message would evolve, deaf poets would always be obliged to convey that message within the same formal poetic means.

The debate over the existence and validity of poetry by deaf writers was intimately connected to the debates over oral or manual education; both were instrumental in the development of a deaf identity. Deaf poetry proved that cultural contributions by deaf persons were valid and necessary; their poetry also, according to Jennifer Esmail “rendered ridiculous the oralists' argument that deaf people would never attain a high level of English literacy without the eradication of signed languages and the introduction of speech training" (363). Thus, deaf poets
used their writing to engage in two debates, for the same purpose: to prove the worth of both their culture and their language. Examining the content of their poetry, however, leads to a third purpose: the early development of a deaf identity. In examining the writing of poets John Carlin, James Nack, Laura Redden Searing, and Angeline Fuller Fischer, it becomes clear that the deaf cultural identity (that is, of a sense pride in one’s deafness) was slow to develop. Yet these poets, over time, change their attitudes about being deaf. From lamentable, to unremarkable, to celebratory—each of the four poets I will now examine plays an important role in the use of poetry to develop a preliminary sense of a deaf cultural identity.

To read this paper in its entirety, please see the Ohio State University’s Knowledge Bank Archives.