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Listening, Thinking, Being: Toward an Ethics of Attunement

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*Listening on All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading* by Richard Deming. Stanford U. Press, 2007. Pp. 182. \$50.

At the same time that we moderns learned about living in regimes of vision that include spectacle (Guy Debord, Laura Mulvey), panopticon (Foucault), and print (Walter Ong), our literary criticism skewed towards vision at the expense of the other senses, especially hearing. Think of the close reading that runs from the New Criticism to deconstruction and beyond, or what Charles Bernstein calls the "Euclidean" prosody of most modern poetics (*Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* [Oxford U. Press, 1998]). Ironically, we still see evidence for this hearing loss in recent literary criticism such as Richard Deming's *Listening on All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading*, which, like Helen Vendler's *Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton U. Press, 2005), paradoxically inscribes a regime of vision into its very title. For her part, Vendler regularly reduces listeners to readers through an aggressive form of synesthesia common in our critical moment when readerly interpretation, engagement, and understanding are usually figured visually. For instance her architecture for the eye situates the lyric poem's addressee "in the room" or out, rather than maintaining a distinctly aural orientation characteristic of the material she examines, including most obviously George Herbert's devotional lyric ("Heaven / O who will show me those delights on high? / *Echo.* / I") or Walt Whitman's bardic persona ("O you singer solitary, singing by yourself, projecting me, / O solitary me listening, nevermore shall I cease perpetuating you"). Despite the recent emergence of sound studies in the literary humanities by way of Bruce Smith and Charles Bernstein, among others, the ear is regularly collapsed into more sophisticated epistemologies and practices of the eye despite all efforts to the contrary.

In fits and starts, Richard Deming's book advances a project of sensual reorientation in the spirit of Stanley Cavell's ordinary language philosophy, and his achievements are noteworthy in a few directions, including a sophisticated intertextuality, a knack for aphorisms, and most importantly a contribution to literary ethics where the ear can play a central role.

Articulating "Emersonian modernism," Deming thoughtfully sets Hawthorne, Melville, Wallace Stevens, Whitman, and William Carlos Williams in conversation with Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others, marking where a European sense for historical con-

sciousness informs, and is informed by, a distinctly American project of skepticism and innovation. Sometimes these connections follow the traditional contours of influence as when Emerson reads Hegel and in turn Nietzsche reads Emerson, and sometimes the connections expand to inform Deming's own efforts "to find and even make new vocabularies new tools . . . in order to find new ways to address and respond to (and thus be responsible for) the world" (26). More than an informative interpretation of canonic literature, Deming positions his book as an act of literature itself. Unnecessary complications follow, such as the effort to fold in too much material without adequate room left for argument or explanation—the stuff of *mere* information, I suppose—as with the sequence of two pages that lurch inexplicably from Wittgenstein to Wordsworth to Shelley to Blake to Williams at the same time that Deming generates aphorisms that crystallize his thought and complicate his relationship to his myriad interlocutors. Who says "interrogatives are one manner of delineating the gaps between groups of language users" (25)? I love this aphorism, which resonates with the insight of Cavell's explanation in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Harvard U. Press, 1994) that J. L. Austin's stories required an "ear" in the most technical sense. Deming in fact thematizes the ambiguity of the speaking agent and thus this question of attribution might seem unfair. Too often, though, canonic names and heavy concepts register as mere talismans without adequate composition. Commenting on Nietzsche, Deming remarks that because aphorisms do not depend on discursivity or narrative they can be "reconfigured within any arrangement and lose none of their rhetorical effect" (114). But one wonders whether Deming's conjecture about Williams's swaggering machismo, his "overcompensating for insecurities about his abilities to make a sustained argument" (144), doubles back on Deming's own aphoristic style. Too often one paragraph ends in a loaded term suggesting elaboration that never comes. For example, a discussion of the sublime in Stevens ends with reference to "repressed" emotion, though this psychoanalytic thread is left dangling (128). Finally aphorism can also founder in reduction: "There is a tremendous difference between Stevens and Pascal. That difference, or at least one difference, might be Emerson" (130). More is lost than gained in this odd equation.

Beyond Vendler's recuperation of certain poets against those who would condemn lyrical intimacy as an exercise in solipsism, Deming does contribute substantially to recent criticism that gropes toward a

new literary ethics. At her most mundane Vendler is interested in how lyrics “reveal the social relations in which the speaker is enmeshed” (*Invisible Listeners*, 3) providing in the case of Herbert “a manual of instruction toward better forms of intimacy in the actual world” (30), or in the case of Whitman an imaginative project from which we can learn “social tolerance and empathic cohesion” (56). Deming—without reference to Vendler—goes beyond this pedagogical model to conceive in literary ethics “a generalized view of negotiating the world and discovering how one lives in it” (24). In other words, for Deming the literary reader does not just learn when thoughtfully attentive, but rather (in the mode of Jacques Derrida, most obviously) produces something new. This ethics receives a powerful articulation in successful aphorisms as noted above, and in Deming’s discussion of Williams’s unpublished notes for a 1941 talk at Harvard: “Perhaps never in the history of the world was it more important to have well constructed verse than today—when the structure of our democratic structure is so threatened—from within and without. To steady us as we pass through the fire (the necessary fire) what can there be but the poem? It represents often our only grip on reality” (151). For in Deming’s discussion we get a very clear sense of how literary ethics must exceed the mere facts of our mutual articulation and achieve value, whether that means the strategically conservative poetry of Williams, or Emerson’s epistemological and rhetorical critique of a culture where slavery helps compose a certain material world (71).

At its most suggestive *Listening on All Sides* advances a critique of communicative instrumentality where listeners merely receive a message and agency focuses exclusively on the voice of the speaker, or, in the contrary case of contemporary literary criticism, meaning is dispersed through the scene of reading and writing (a notable exception coming in Derrida’s discussion of Nietzsche in *The Ear of the Other*). All writing dictates and is dictated by “the ways that language gets used to say things,” but literary texts are particularly instructive insofar as they are “disinterred from an immediate or definable social, and thus communicative, instrumentality” (111). And just like that we are back to the *scene* of writing where listening is an afterthought. “Knowing language, by way of looking (and listening) closely (to words *and* use), can create sensitivity to the intimacy it affords” (14). Perhaps we should understand this final collapse which is characteristic of our best literary critics as a swerve away from “classical rhetoric” itself understood as the original model of communicative instrumentality,

and introduced by Deming in his discussion of J. Hillis Miller on the ethics of reading. "Whereas classical rhetoric focuses on the most useful strategies for persuasion, eschewing questions of meaning making, thereby assuring the rhetor of his or her ascendant or at least dominant position, Miller shifts the attention to the audience. This repositioning suggests that any text's meaning is a complicity, which implicates reader and author, neither having soul or even definitive authority" (41). I would suggest classical rhetoric has always provided the means to reflect on instrumental language as well as produce it, while Aristotle himself establishes that the discipline falls into three divisions determined by the three classes of listeners—judge, assemblyman, or ceremonial auditor—insisting that the listener, and not the speaker or topic, determines a speech's end and object (*Rhetoric*, 1358b). Then, if we revisit Herbert and his contemporaries for one more notable example we find the pervasive Renaissance models of rhetoric, both religious and secular, where the ear might come first as the vehicle for God's Word or dramatize the work of slander, hearsay, and other obvious forms of social audition (see Kenneth Gross on *Shakespeare's Noise* [U. of Chicago Press, 2001]).

Perhaps as we rediscover models of rhetoric that take the listener seriously some of our critical dead ends that currently wind up in the gawking reader will also find new avenues. Despite missed opportunities, Deming's effort in the domain of American pragmatism brings us that much closer.

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