

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 38 | Issue 4

Article 54

1968

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Recommended Citation

Logan, John. "A Note on the Inarticulate as Hero." *New Mexico Quarterly* 38, 4 (1968). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol38/iss4/54>

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A NOTE ON THE INARTICULATE AS HERO

John Logan

This essay is dedicated with love to my senior students in Literary Criticism, 1963, for whom it was originally written.

Reading Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* recently and finding myself as stirred by it as the first time I read it I found myself wondering why it is we are so deeply moved by a figure who is incapable of speech. I am thinking of course of Benjy whose interior monologue we are given in the first section of the novel and who reappears in crucial ways throughout the book. Now, there are special reasons in the context of Faulkner why Benjy's inarticulateness is important, if I read the book aright. But at this time I want to get some perspective on him by considering Benjy in relation to a recurring figure in literature and art—in an attempt to shed some light on the general emotional resonance we find around such a figure. The total mute like Benjy is surely very rare as a character in literature, though we find him occasionally as in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. However, the partial mute, or the simply inarticulate character is not so rare. Here are six examples that occur immediately: the hero of Poe's short story "The Man Who Lost His Voice." Billy Budd, the stammerer in Melville's novel named for him. The man with the injured tongue who is the central figure of Joyce's short story "Grace." The Philomena figure of Greek mythology, of Ovid and of Eliot's *Wasteland*. The prophet in Ionesco's play *The Chairs*. The boy in Steinbeck's *A Flight* who at the conclusion of the story tries to speak but, because of his dying, thickened tongue, cannot. Six figures in films who are mute or partially mute also come to mind; one is the girl in an older film, *Johnny Belinda*, the part played powerfully by Jane Wyman, a mute and deaf girl who is brutally raped. A second female figure is the character representing Helen Keller in a recent film, *The Miracle Worker*, where the muteness is again combined with deafness. I wish to emphasize that I am not speaking of Miss Keller herself and her problems but of the ar-

tistic figure made from her story who moved us so deeply as part of a drama. Four other figures are males: one is a singer whose part was played by Frank Sinatra in the film *The Joker Is Wild*. This man is attacked by vengeful hoodlums and his throat slashed so that he can no longer sing. He loses his voice totally for a time. Two others are characters in works by Ingmar Bergman: The Magician in the film of that name and one of the three rapists in *Virgin Spring*. The final one I wish to mention is the figure of the prize fighter played by Anthony Quinn in the recent *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, who like classical heroes generally, is made to suffer through the very thing he is excellent at, through his particular virtue: for this man partially loses his power of articulation as a result of blows to the voice box suffered in the ring, the place where he is a prince.

Now if one will assume with me that these figures have a peculiar power to move us in the art works of which they are a part, we ought to try to find out why, and indeed it is likely that there are different reasons for our being moved in the different works. It is hard to suppose for example that the magician and the rapist in Bergman's two films move us for the same reasons. But let us explore the material a little and see if there are any relations among them. Let us, that is, put ourselves in the position of students observing a teacher who is himself unsure of what he wants to say and is struggling (as I am at this moment) and who is therefore himself one of the types of the inarticulate—whether heroic or not in this case clearly remains to be seen. We remember that there is also a type of the inarticulate as buffoon, fit object for kicks in the behind. Let us see.

It seems to me we can begin here: There is a part in each of us which responds to the inarticulate for we are all throughout our lives somewhat in the position of Socrates' slave boy in *The Meno* who did not know and who therefore or for that very reason could not say—he became and we become articulate only as the result of prodding and response, as the result of willing ourselves away from the direction of the vegetable, which (or who) is the absolute inarticulate in some sense. The struggle to articulate I mean is related to the struggle to become educated, to *Paidea*, to use Werner Jaeger's title, which title reminds us that the central concept of education for the Platonist Greeks was the notion of being led outside oneself—being moved toward another state than that which one finds oneself in toward the higher inarticulateness of ecstasy. Plato's esoteric doctrines he tells us in his *Seventh Epistle* are not to be found in his writings: they are present as

flames in the minds of listeners fanned to brightness by the dialogues which themselves are thus seen necessarily to lack full articulation. The importance of effort and labor and discipline in the auditor is crucial here, and I feel sure that one of the reasons we respond to the partially inarticulate hero like the prize fighter I spoke of or Billy Budd or even the standard Marlon Brando mumblor is that we are all born mumbler, while only through trying and effort as Plato considered it, do we come to wisdom. The true inarticulate in Plato's *Meno* is not the ignorant slave boy but the facile *Meno*, who paradoxically has much speech, who has learned definitions and passed many examinations and taken, we feel sure, several degrees; *Meno*, who can repeat, but who finally strikes us like Polonius does as a figure of impotence despite his flow of words because his words are out of touch with his self.

A logorrhea or torrent of words of the kind released by many students in oral examinations or by many teachers as well as students in seminars or by many inferior poets in their work or by many preachers in their sermons or by the character of Lucky in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* strikes us not as a sign of power but as a sign of powerlessness, so that there is finally no very profound connection between inarticulateness and powerlessness, for the apparently articulate director of flows of words can strike us as equally powerless. The question is this: to what extent is the power of articulation in touch with the root of the man, with his own self—or to take a physical figure paraphrasing D. H. Lawrence, to what extent is a man's penis the instrument of his speech? Lawrence said in *Lady Chatterly's Lover* that unless a painter paints with his penis the work has failed. Lawrence believed the same for the writer or reader. Now, don't misunderstand me. I am not simply saying some reductive, psychoanalytical thing about the connections in the unconscious between semen and ink and between pens or brushes and phalluses and the equivalence of these to power, nor was Lawrence doing so. These things perhaps are true but they are half truths. They are heresies. Faulkner points up their heretical nature, the false equating of penis and power, by making Benjy in *The Sound and the Fury* both mute and castrated while at the same time allowing him power and righteousness and perceptivity of an almost god-like kind. He is thus contrasted to two other castrated figures: the hero, if one may call him that, of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, who lacks power, and Clifford Chatterly in Lawrence's novel whose outward, castrative war injury strikes one as an outward symbol of his actual inner powerlessness and inhumanity. Thus I am speaking now not so much about

the organs themselves and their presence or absence; rather, I am speaking of the powers or spirits (in the ancient phrase of Galen "the faculties") behind organs, and I am suggesting that as the flesh of the larynx (or Adam's apple as it is so perfectly called) is contiguous with the flesh of the arm and the abdomen and with the flesh of the genitals so the power or spirit behind the larynx is contiguous with the power or spirit behind the genital, behind the organ of the man as man or the woman as woman, so that a failure in one is felt as a failure in the other through the very integrity or spiritual (I prefer personal) unity of the human being. Now we seem much more willing to see the larynx as the organ which marks the man than to see the penis so, for the larynx houses the word, the word is sacred for it has been made flesh and speech connected to the rational part of man is much more his mark than the penis which is an instrument he shares with animals and its power a power he shares with them, we smugly say. In my opinion there is about as much sense to the idea that the human genital serves the same function as the genital of an animal (say the rabbit) as there is to the idea that the human voice box serves the same function as the voice box of the rabbit—who by the way is capable of an eerie scream that rakes the heart to the bone. Remember that a rabbit doesn't care about Billy Budd, Benjy, the injured prize fighter, or Poe's man who lost his voice or any of the castrated figures I mentioned—and not simply because he is unable to perform syllogisms. To say that a rabbit, or whatever, is an animal is simply to say that he possesses no organ of love whatsoever and at the same time no power of love. The thing which makes a man a man is his ability to love; if a man's reason is not in the service of his powers of love but is used to defend himself against love or on the other hand to commit offenses against it as in the calculated seduction scene which fails to take into account his person as a man and his partner's person as a woman, then his rationality is not a human rationality at all. Reason can be inhuman, Only love cannot be.

What has this to do with the inarticulate as hero? Precisely this: that which every man primarily wants to articulate is this very fact that he is first of all a lover. We feel such blows as the slashing of the vocal cords of the figure in Frank Sinatra's film or the raping of the girl in the Jane Wyman film, or such failures as Billy Budd's in Melville's story or that of the man who lost his voice in Poe's story very deeply not because of the universal fear of literal castration as some would hold but because these blows and failures strike us at the very heart of our own inarticulateness, the inarticulateness of ourselves as lovers, and thus they make

us feel our boyishness. For who has uttered his love totally or succeeded in separating his love totally from hatred, ending the ambivalence of youth? The struggle of Anthony Quinn in *Requiem for a Heavyweight* to express his love for his girl or his feeling for his friend is simply symbolized by the injury to his voice box. The reality of his struggle goes far deeper and joins with the reality of our own isolation and of our own pathetic but, God willing, our increasingly successful attempts to turn ourselves further into lovers of our wives, of our girls, of our parents, of our students, of our friends. It is only to the extent that we can make ourselves lovers that we can make ourselves men, for the part that hates is the part that is not a man.

I must say this seems to me to be a religious idea, a religious interpretation of the fact that we are moved by inarticulate heroes. There is a further development of my interpretation which I also believe to be religious. It is this: Only when we have begun to make ourselves men through the articulation of our love (the step dealt with in the tragedies of the young—as of Hamlet or of Raskolnikof) can we then begin to make ourselves saints and seers and oracles (the step dealt with in the tragedies of the aged as of Lear and Oedipus at Colonnus). It is in this second stage, the stage of the superman or oracle (I prefer to call him saint) that we see the further positive meaning of our response to the inarticulate hero, for the utterance of an oracle, like the parables of Christ, is highly inarticulate, related to the sounds of the wind and to the keenings of the Greek choruses, except for him who in the words of the New Testament “has ears to hear.” The greatest moment of articulation of the fullest man we find is a moment of silence. “The rest is silence,” of the end of *Hamlet* is such a moment. There is another at the end of St. Thomas’ work where he says that all he has done is as nothing and there is still another at the end of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* where he says, “Wovon mann nicht sprechen kann daruber musst mann schweigen.” These silences are very different coming as they do at the ends of profound works. The silences at the beginnings of works are the ones of which we should beware. In the 10th book of his *Confessions* Augustine says of the work he has done, “In sound it is silent; in affection it cries aloud.” There is such a moment in the silent ecstasy of “St. Theresa in her wild lament” caught by Bernini, of St. Augustine in his loud repose caught brilliantly by Botticelli in a fresco over the inscription “St. Augustine so lived that he does not yet know he is dead.” I am speaking of the unique moment of articulation or inarticulation—one hardly knows which to say—to which we are directed

by the Bible: "Be still and know that I am God." The quiet of a saint or the obscure utterance of a seer, which is like an image of silence, is very different from the silence of Iago at the end of his tragedy. The saint shuts up so that he can hear better the ineffable Voice. Iago shuts up as a natural result of his own self-castration and so that he will not have to give an account of himself.

The first problem of a man is to learn how to utter his love, which is the articulation of himself as a person, and the second problem is to learn how to shut up, which is the articulation of himself as a saint. Therefore both in the struggle to speak and in the active quietness of the inarticulate hero we see ourselves in depth, and we reaffirm our hope of change and we experience through them, these superb incompetents, what Nietzsche so beautifully called "metaphysical solace." It is these factors more than the factor of apparent loss of power (superficially real as it is) which moves us in these heroes. My proof is this: we are really more or less prepared to deal with the feeling of the loss of power or the lack of power, for we have been familiar with it since infancy and have lived with it as children who could not have what we wanted or as masturbating adolescents or as adult neurotics, so that it is a feeling which is not finally very moving—we are, that is, at home with it. However we are much less prepared (and much more afraid) to tap in ourselves the feelings related to our painful articulation of our human love or the speechlessness we feel in the presence of God. And it is these feelings, not those of the impotent boy but those of the powerful man and the oracular saint which the inarticulate hero calls into our minds and hearts and which he, through the art of his creator, articulates.

Poor, mute Benjy gives us our voice as poor, drunken, dead Faulkner gave Benjy his. I believe Faulkner himself is more closely identified with Benjy than with any other character, though all his characters come out of him, for the artist is an idiot, a mad man, the poet in Shakespeare's phrase lets his eyes "roll in a fine frenzy," and the word "nothing" in "A tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing," source of Faulkner's title, gains meaning as we see this and as we begin to reflect on the positive meanings of the concept of "nothing" like the positive meanings of the concept of silence. "Nothing" in this phrase as it applies to Faulkner's novel is I believe related to Stephen Daedalus' "Nothung!"—the oath he uttered as he struck the chandelier with his cane in the brothel scene of *Ulysses*, ending his hallucinations and his illusions, and freeing himself. For Stephen this apparently inarticulate noise, this ejaculation, was not an end to meaning. It was a beginning.