Cloaking the Voice in Silence: Wilkie Collins’s *Hide and Seek* and the Textual Spectacle
Sound is not welcome in Wilkie Collins’ utopic, nameless neighborhood—a “no place,” or more appropriately, a “noiseless place.” Sound, or its lack thereof, permeates the streets of London, the private suburbs and domestic interiors. Collins’ incredible attention to visual and aural detail in the opening pages of *Hide and Seek* quickly establishes the dialectic between image and word that becomes like Wordsworth’s “a sense sublime far more deeply interfused”\(^1\) throughout the text. By *imaging* a soundscape for the reader through his pen, by animating the scene at hand through the written word, Wilkie Collins becomes a metaphorical painter: “the unspeakable desolation” of London’s gritty social reality is shunned from this utopic space where “irreverent street noises fainted dead away,” “the cry of the costermonger and the screech of the vagabond London boy were banished out of hearing. Even the regular tradesman’s time-honored business noises at customer’s doors seemed as if they ought to have been relinquished here…always sounded profanely.”\(^2\) Collins’s modality of writing is figured as *ekphrasis*—the speaking picture, which not only paints the scene, but also paradoxically “mutes” the “unspeakable” sound as that which can only be contained and dissolved in the word. Noise is treacherous and often unwanted, for silence preserves the secrets inherent in the narrative discourse and anticipates deaf experience. The lacunae left by these silences is a positive absence of sound, a metonymy that appropriately “names” and assigns space for deaf discourse.

The opening of *Hide and Seek* primes us to mediate sound as a Deaf person; as readers of

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1 William Wordsworth, "Tintern Abbey" (1798), 95-6.
the silent text, we “see” the spoken voices in our heads. Reader and character are aligned on the same democratic plane in which language is shared and reciprocal, deconstructed from its verbal capabilities to its essence—the written sign, the mute, but sighted word. Lennard J. Davis’s discussion of the novel in general as providing a virtual reality of sorts, in which deafness is the primary means of negotiating worlds of fiction, illuminates the relationship between text and language. Quoting Roland Barthes, he writes “the deaf experience the text at the degree zero of writing, as text first and foremost. That is, to be deaf is to experience the written text in its most readerly incarnation. The text would not then be transformed into an auditory translation but would be seen as language itself.”

Davis’s conception of “the Deafened moment” also accounts for the tangible silences that so powerfully demarcate the beginning and end of speech and sound in the novel. To take up Pierre Macherey’s claim, “the silence of the book is not a lack to be remedied, an inadequacy to be made up for.” Silence does not disable or paralyze—rather, it is the critical groundwork from which the novel evolves. However, we must consider the differing degrees of silence: does the text advocate for an absolute, “Deaf” silence, or a silence that can speak (in metaphorical terms) in *Hide and Seek*? Does language, speech, gesture and the image/sign in Collins’s text figure this silence in visible terms? *Hide and Seek*’s performance of what I call the “textual spectacle,” in which language may uncover, screen, or “play” with its form and substance, might provide us with an appropriate critical lens for

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5 Deaf with a capital “D” denotes those who rely on Sign Language and consider themselves inclusive to the Deaf culture, a group that claims themselves to be a minority on the basis of linguistic differences. Conversely, deaf with a lower “d” refers to the overarching group of people with varying degrees of hearing losses, and who often rely on lip-reading as a primary means of communication. The Deaf do not consider silence an absence or negative state, but rather as a positive space, for it structures the world they live in. Thus, my use of “Deaf silence” refers to the complete lack of concrete sound or speech as perceived by the auditory sense.
examining these visual and aural structures.

A spectacle can be defined as “a person or thing exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity and contempt or (b) of marvel, or admiration; a sight or view of something; with descriptive adjectives denoting the impression; a means of seeing; a device for assisting defective eyesight” (OED). A spectacle generates a spectrum of adverse extremes as a picture, a play, a simulacrum, a monstrosity, a beauty; operating by means of projection and by an opening outwards, it often engenders a moment of revelation and silent awe. Not only does the text function as spectacle in this melodramatic sense, but Collins’s disclaimer (see Appendix I) is also ironically figured as the loud cry of the circus promoter, who excitedly exhibits *Hide and Seek*’s unusual character as a painting/performance to be viewed on all sides of the text. Collins’s hyperbolic statement somewhat brashly declares the “spectacle of these afflictions” as a “fit object for any writer”—an “object” of extraordinary aesthetic value: as an instrument of visual and textual potential, the Deaf figure is easily exploited by one like Collins, who takes licentious authorial freedom in supplanting and coloring the incapacitated voice with his own.

The protagonist of the novel, “Madonna” Mary Blyth, is an exceptional character in every way. As a Deaf, orphaned, and visually stunning young woman, Madonna is the vehicle through which textual, visual and verbal discourses are filtered. Initially presented as an object, a “painted,” “speechless thing,” Madonna is slowly rendered into a humanized subject by her assimilation of painting and non-verbal communication. Indeed, the scaffold of language becomes a stage in which power relations play out according to the hierarchical modes of communication. Collins’ novel is generated out of his desire to “draw the Deaf-mute simply and exactly out of nature” (165); by “draw,” I take up our author’s vocabulary to point to the pictorial
nature of the word as an emblem scratched out on a particular medium and to the figural language used narratively. In this respect, Madonna is a figure of “picturesque affliction,” constructed by Collins as a walking oxymoron: she is aesthetically pleasing, yet she is also often read to be in a condition of great distress. As the victim of this artistic discordance, she is at the center of what Stephen Greenblatt calls “linguistic colonialism;” Madonna is coerced against her will to speak and is often described as a “solitary,” “exiled from the worlds of sound and speech” (171). However, Madonna’s rebellious silence, with her choice to rely on her writing slate and sign language, in turn dismantles the hegemonic force behind language, making others like Zack, her love interest/half-brother (a relation unbeknownst to her) and her long-lost uncle Mat voiceless as well.

By further dissecting the manifold layers of textuality, I posit that Valentine Blyth, Madonna’s adoptive father, is a metanarrator by means of his visual vocabulary. As Madonna’s surrogate voice via the lexicon of images and sign, Valentine conflates image and text as a “narrative prosthesis” that superficially corrects Madonna’s deviant silence as that which is normative and artistically idealized. The image itself even intrudes at key junctions in the text, literally illustrating the necessity for a visual sign (or drawing) as part of the “textual spectacle.” Employing ut pictura poesis, or Simonides’ claim that “painting is mute poetry, and poetry is the speaking picture,” Blyth encapsulates Madonna’s silence in his painting; at the secondary level, Collins’ prose describes the utopic scenes in which Madonna is “presented as together [as] a

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6 Martha Stoddard Holmes in Affliction: Disability in Victorian Culture (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004) popularizes “picturesque affliction” as a term coined by Louis James in claiming that Wilkie Collins’ disabled characters are often “cliché(s) from melodrama,” an inherent feature of the genre itself.


picture” (104). Collins as author sets the precedent for Madonna’s own vocal potential, in which she comes to communicate herself through the written word and sign language. At the same time, this language suppresses its aurality, for at the “degree zero,” writing encapsulates the tension between the oral and visual nature of the word. Writing seeks to negotiate these two processes—it is Other and encounters the Other that is intrinsic to the disability narrative. At the tertiary level, Madonna employs gesture as her once stunted “voice” returns in evolved form. Her signing hands signify an irruption out of writing—language is not just written down in two-dimensional form, but takes on a three-dimensional, linguistic space. As the embodiment of performative language, Madonna’s sign language also fulfills the melodramatic genre of *Hide and Seek* by enacting and harmonizing the expressive nature of voice and body. The ear is no longer simply a receptor for sound, but as the tympan, the eardrum or printed page/press, the ear separates and constructs a barrier against fluid communicability. Conversely, as a manuscript (the scripted page), the tympan is also the text that both creates and dissolves the barrier between spoken and visual, enacting a mimetic reverberation throughout the text. Ghostly voices often bubble up from the page, like uncontrollable hiccups, but the emphasis on visual language screens these oral lapses.

The text functions as a palimpsest in which the multiple narratives necessitate the urge to dig up and figuratively exhume the “secret” at stake. The ciphering of language through the signs of *ekphrasis*, writing, and the system of gesture is a trope for textual discourse.¹⁰ As George Eliot’s narrator remarks in *Middlemarch*, “Is there any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch?”¹¹ Ultimately, *Hide

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¹⁰ All of Madonna’s idiosyncratic sign languages might formulate what is called “home sign.” Home sign is a personalized construction of gesture, facial expression, body movements and other various modes of communication, and is usually best understood by those most intimate with the home signer.

and Seek is not a child’s game of Marco Polo, a game of verbal “call-and-response”; rather, the reader is invited to participate in an exchange of “see(k)-and-find.” An allegorical search for Madonna’s lost hearing and voice, “hide-and-seek” embodies the process of recovering what is “not to be found, not at hand, absent, missing, lacking” (OED), or, perhaps Madonna’s voice is merely hidden, internalized, cloaked in the text itself.

In Hide and Seek, sound—in its readerly incarnation as a deafened, but positive absence—is relayed to the reader through ekphrasis, yet the silencing authority of the visual field manages to overpower its aural nature. However, the opening of the novel inundates the reader with sensory information, providing sights, smells and sounds through which we can selectively map out the landscape. Sensory language bleeds into a form of linguistic synesthesia, yet Collins also manages to emphasize vision and hearing through specific and distinct triggers. The text, as the fulcrum between writing and reading, cannot be anything but inherently synesthetic, for the narrative evokes and stimulates manifold sensations through sensory input from our eyes and fingers. With this remarkable permeability in which all senses are “calibrated” in equilibrium with each other, Collins enables the reader to engage his work with complete openness. We are first drawn into Baregrove Square, which is almost nearly abandoned with the exception of the solitary Samuel Snoxell:

All blinds drawn down for the most part over all windows; what light came from the sky came like light seen through dusty glass; the grim brown hue of the brick houses looked more dirtily mournful than ever….the muddy gutters gurgled; the heavy rain-drops dripped into empty areas audibly. No object great or small, no out of door litter whatever appeared anywhere to break the dismal uniformity of line and substance in the perspective of the square (8-9).

Light is opaque, and the sounds seem to evoke the brown, muddy colors that are “mournful” and “grim.” Yet, the synesthesia of the auditory sense perception with vision also emphasizes the separation between sight and sound by their very contiguity: the text above literally begins and
ends with vision, for the “light from the sky” circumscribes the noise with the “uniformity of line.” Noise is imprisoned in the text, shut in on all sides by the typescript and blank margins. Thus, sound is provoked into becoming moribund and violent—it hammers against our tympan with its deathly knell as a feeble attempt to shatter the visual frame.

Shaped under the line and substance of vision, sound is necessarily invested with a kenotic force: it empties itself out in its ephemerality and vacates its audible space. The “muddy gutters [that] gurgled and the heavy rain-drops [that] dripped into empty areas audibly” leave behind an absence. Can noise even exist in this dismal place if it encapsulates and produces a void? Although the trickling noises of the water might be considered a “slow,” repetitive sound, the gurgling fails to impose its lingering effects on “the dismal uniformity of the line and substance in the perspective of the square.” The “line” and “perspective” suppress the aural sense and enforce visual authority through the use of artistic description; the scene is almost fixed for the reader like a painting. However, when “a shrill series of cries in a child’s voice” manages to pierce through the canvas of Baregrove Square, to the degree that they “struck on [Snoxell’s] ear and stopped his progress immediately,” it seems as if Snoxell’s eardrum, and the printed page are perforated (9). Perhaps this abuse of sound, powerful enough to “murder” any movement and visual curiosity, forebodes sound’s status as an unwanted, criminal entity.

Sound is assigned an unusual role in Hide and Seek, for its effects are typically restricted to literature’s normative conception of silence. In Collins’s world, sound does not connote life, movement, or civilization; rather, it is ostracized from the novel and feared for its profanity. Jonathan Rée’s standard formulation of silence in I See a Voice is useful in considering how sound functions in Hide and Seek; he writes: “silence, however, does not impede your hearing, or muffle sounds that would otherwise be audible. It signifies a positive absence of sound: it is not
opaque, but deathly.” Conversely, sound in *Hide and Seek* “impedes” and “muffles,” and signifies “absence.” Sound is also “deathly,” and is “banished out of hearing” for the locals of Baregrove Square (35), for it serves as a reminder of what is no longer present. What the passerby hears is not the sound of vitality, but of mortality:

The pilgrim hears strange things said [“for which you have spared for a little while”] of you in secret, as he duteously interprets the old, primeval language of the leaves; as he listens to the death-doomed trees, still whispering mournfully around him the last notes of their ancient even-song! (33)

The aural world is already in a progressive state of decay, with its “last notes” echoing “mournfully” against the arrival of the new utopia of “spick-and-span stillness” (35). Noise is no longer a welcome citizen to *Hide and Seek*’s paradise of stillness—it remains outside the ear and the text, which has hermetically sealed itself against its intrusion.

Collins’s personification of Quiet and Noise as more tangible characters in his novel emphasizes their importance not only as sensory perceptions encoded in language, but also marks them as important figures of action in the narrative. Although Noise is exiled early in the text, it returns later to remind us of its presence and its antagonistic tension with the “reign” of Quiet: “Outside the house, as well as inside, the drowsy reign of old primeval Quiet was undisturbed by the innovating vagaries of the rebel, Noise” (491). We are told by Collins to distrust noise, for its eccentricity only serves to confuse and to distract from the story at hand. Ultimately, the persuasive case Collins builds against Noise primes the reader to mediate the text as a Deaf person—pleasure will only be derived from a visual reading in which sound cannot be anything but mute, its aurality circumscribed by the text.

The language Collins employs in the novel is not quite *ekphrasis*, but *inverse ekphrasis*—the “speaking” picture that mutes its sound. W.J.T. Mitchell, whose work in the visual field is

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concerned with the relationship between language and the visual arts, offers a useful model of ekphrasis. What Mitchell calls the “utopian aspirations of ekphrasis—that the mute image be endowed with a voice, made dynamic and active” 13 is turned inside-out in *Hide and Seek*; the mute image speaks, but its utopian aspiration is to suppress the voice, to refrain from sounding out. Mitchell also provides an alternative view of ekphrasis, which fits more closely with the inverse ekphrasis model I suggest; its intentions are made to “come into view,” (as opposed to being made to speak) the “poetic language might be ‘stilled,’ made iconic, or ‘frozen’ into a static, spatial array.”14 Mitchell’s eloquent model of ekphrasis as a literary device that leaves “poetic language still, or ‘frozen’ into a static, spatial array” constitutes the heart of *Hide and Seek*’s spoken language. However, the reader must be wary of inverse ekphrasis, for the muted picture’s “textual rendering as a transparent window onto reality [is] supplanted by the notion of the image as a deceitful illusion.” 15 Indeed, the “textual rendering” of sound and the image is not fixed, but evolves throughout the narrative in conjunction with Madonna’s maturation. Mitchell’s notion of a utopic language also can be identified in Madonna, as an ekphrastic “utopian figure of the image” whose voice is also suppressed to conform to her “noiseless” landscape.16 Although she is inherently a figure of the “Other,” as one who cannot participate in the shared aurality that treacherously pierces the ears of hearing characters, Madonna silently speaks through her writing and pictured language. What inverse ekphrasis provides then, is a visual domain in which both Madonna and her counterparts are located on a democratic plane, where all insidious noises are displaced by the “primeval Quiet.” Mitchell demonstrates this democratic scene as one in which “the central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called the

‘overcoming of otherness’. Indeed, if the ear is figured as the Other for Madonna, perhaps her ear is ironically the locus where she may find identification with those who hear.

In *The Ear of the Other*, Jacques Derrida discusses the structure of the ear as an open, perceiving organ, in contrast to *Hide and Seek*, where it is also symbolically closed off to Noise. In some respects, the danger of sound is transferred onto the ear, which Derrida describes as “uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen (as in laisser-faire, since the ear is the most tendered and most open organ).” But most important, as the site of exchange, “the ear—your ear which is also the ear of the other—begins to occupy in your body the disproportionate place of the ‘inverted cripple’.”

The configuration of the ear as “uncanny” is appropriate in illustrating its function as a receptacle of noise, that which is outside, ostracized and unwanted. Likewise, “the ear of the other” that occupies the “disproportionate place of the inverted cripple” structures the relationship between Madonna and Zack—her deafness becomes his metaphorical hearing loss as well.

Turning to a pivotal scene that illustrates this dynamic, a drunken Zack stumbles home in the middle of the night, hoping to pass quietly to his room. Noise becomes his enemy, threatening to betray his presence to his sleeping parents. Moreover, no longer in control of his own voice, the sounds that escape Zack suggest that his own hearing is Deafened as well. Silence is such an active presence that it becomes Zach’s single focus to preserve it:

“Steady,” muttered Zack, “I’m done for it if I make any noise.” He next opened the door, so quietly that he was astonished at himself—and entered the passage with marvelous stealthiness—then closed the door again. And cried ‘Hush!’ when he found that he had let the lock go a little too noisily (280).

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Yet Zack still speaks against the silence, paradoxically needing to affirm verbally it through a self-assuring “Hush!” which could very well undermine his “stealthiness.” Zack is even “astonished at himself” for his ability to protect the fragile silence, which in part depends on his ability to hear. Zack listens before he acts, for sound, or the absence thereof, is intertwined with his own metaphorical absence in the house in the ears of its residents. Zack’s relationship with silence is not quite as positive as Madonna’s; rather, his affiliation corresponds to Jonathan Rée’s configuration of silence as “deathly.” Zack inhabits Madonna’s position at the center of an all-encompassing silence, but he is not comfortable with the quiet: “The dark stillness above and around him was instinct with an awful and virtuous repose” (280). This silence seems to reverberate with tension, for it as an “instinct with an awful and virtuous repose”—each word seems to knock against the other, throbbing with conflicting desires to rupture and preserve the tranquility. Zack’s status as a hearing individual within a Deaf world interrupts Hide and Seek’s quiet utopia, for sound is deeply and “ominously” interfused within the silence, as exemplified by the “solemn tick-tick of the kitchen clock—never audible from the passage in the day-time: terribly and incomprehensibly distinct at this moment” (280). Yet, the reader is still in a Deafened mode, for the “tick-tick” is “incomprehensible,” only made “distinct” through its italicization within the text. Sound may be too easily accessible for Zack here, but we are urged to read on quietly, participating in the act of silencing.

Zack’s attempts to conform to silence are signaled by his oral self-chastisement and careful listening. However, Zack’s slips become increasingly “dangerous” and unruly, progressing towards Madonna’s speech, which is purely emotive and abnormal. Zack temporarily supplants Madonna as a figurative victim of a perforated eardrum, for he is “terrified at the violence and suddenness of the relapse [of hiccoughing], and clap[s] his hand to his mouth
when it was too late” (281). Perhaps Collins’s intention is to demonstrate that *Hide and Seek*’s characters truly share a democratic world, where silence must be the necessary mode of operation. Not only is sound injurious to Zack, but immediately hereafter he also uses his hands to stifle, or cover over the noise, simultaneously mimicking Madonna’s sign language in place of his voice. Zack’s physical suppression not only enacts the prosopopeia of the “primeval Quiet” against the “rebel, Noise,” but he also *gestures* to Madonna’s aphonia, signaling his own aphasia as parallel “Deafened” reader of/within the text. The house’s silence has been powerful enough to suppress Zack’s hiccups—until now, when “by dire fatality, the stifled hiccoughs burst beyond all control” (282, my emphasis). Noise, despite its exile, has returned to betray Zack.

What if Zack’s unwanted ejaculations are not merely his own, but also a manifestation of Madonna’s lost, or repressed voice? In juxtaposition with Zack’s excessive listening, his “uncanny” predicament reiterates Derrida’s *The Ear of the Other*, in which he is the “keen ear, (the) both, (the) double, he [signs] double.” The novel strongly emphasizes Zack’s “doubling” of Madonna, as he is “half-deafened” by a “lusty and ceaseless singing that began in his ears” (283). Zack’s superfluous hearing is ironically what deafens him. As the “ear of the other,” Zack’s ear mirrors Derrida’s claim that the ear “begins to occupy [in the text’s] body, the *disproportionate* place of the ‘inverted cripple’.” Derrida’s formulation of the “inverted cripple” echoes with Mitchell’s “narrative prosthesis,” in which physical disability—through its inherent *visibility*—allows the narrative to be turned on its head. The “crippling” that takes place is not what we think of in disability discourse as the “un-ableing” of the body; rather it is the overcompensation or overdetermination of the text to reestablish equipoise. By the same token, in the spirit of *inverse ekphrasis*, Zack undoes the vise of muteness through his effusive speaking

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21 Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 35.
and listening to the extent that he “ceased to be a human being: he became a giddy atom, spinning drunkenly in illimitable space” (283). Collins renders Zack into a sound atom, another “speechless thing” that knows neither social conventions nor bounds. Zack’s vertigo also stems from his “half-deafening” when he temporarily loses his hearing because noise overwhelms his inner ear, throwing his entire balance off-kilter (285). This moment of instability suggests a shift, and a metaphorical inner ear fluidity between Zack and Madonna as Deafened characters. Storming into his room, Zack’s father shouts “Degraded beast!” consigning him to Madonna’s former role, the objectified spectacle of a freak show. Mr. Thorpe embellishes Zack’s humility, letting “the door suddenly shut again with a bang—and that [Zack] was left once more in total darkness. He did not care for the light, or the voice, or the banging of the door” (284). Although Zack does not need the light Madonna cherishes, he too succumbs to the darkness, excavated of voice and the dissonant door. A metaphor for absence, or the “blinding” of noise, darkness provides the blank template on which we can locate and compare Zack and Madonna.

In a scene remarkably similar to Zack’s drunken episode, Madonna returns to the art studio in the middle of the night to search for her tobacco-pouch before going to bed. Armed with a single candle, she is unaware of another occupant in the room, who is encroaching upon the privacy and safety of her home. The house is truly Madonna’s utopic space, for there is a “profound silence” that subdues the relatively harmless “weird house-noises which live in the death of night and die in the life of day; by that sudden crackling in the wall, by that mysterious creaking in the furniture” (491). These small sounds however, are meant to prepare us for a larger interruption—an irruption of sound not from within the house, but from Madonna herself. The intruder, Mathew Grice, is similarly drawn as a Deaf figure, for his silence is also necessary if he is to keep his presence hidden. Mat listens carefully for any betraying noises, his ear an
open receptacle for a “faint sound on the staircase of the house [which catches] his ear” (493).

However, like Zack, Mat loses control of his voice:

he had not self-control enough to suppress the involuntary exclamation which burst from
his lips…A violent spasmodic action contracted the muscles of his throat. He clinched
his fist in a fury of suppressed rage against himself, as he felt that his own voice had
turned traitor and betrayed him (493, my emphasis).

His ejaculation is a “violent spasmodic action” that leaves him so traumatized that he feels as if
he has been alienated from his own voice. The motif of latent voices dispersed throughout *Hide
and Seek* arises again, volatized in unexpected moments. Are these the lost voices of the Deaf
that Collins pays tribute to? Although it may be contentious whether or not the Deaf voice is
“lost,” what I mean to suggest is that the absence of Deaf subjective vocalization in the aural
sense as well as in literature structures a space (and patriarchal desire) for Collins to “fill-in-the-
blanks” on behalf of those like Madonna. Without intervention, the Deaf voice borders on a
potential, but one that remains internalized, contained and unrealized in a vestigial form, as a
hypostatized mouth. Yet, Wilkie Collins makes these surreptitious voices explicit; in a narrative
interjection preceding the aforementioned scene, he writes of these “still small ghostly sounds
from inanimate bodies, which we have all been startled by, over and over again. While lingering
at our book” (491). Sublimated from “inanimate bodies” into what resembles something more
human, these sounds startle us repeatedly, like traumatic repetitions. While we “linger at our
book,” voices haunt us from the text itself, and the written word tropes the delayed response of
Madonna’s childhood trauma that left her Deaf.

Madonna’s hearing loss is reenacted through the loss of light, and both occasions produce
a spontaneous reaction in which she speaks out with an “uncanny” voice. Just as Madonna’s
hearing vanishes into thin air after her horseback riding accident (“the handle in the strap gave
way of all a sudden” 129), her sight too is “blown out.” In a manipulative, but clever maneuver,
Mat, who “knew that she was incapable of hearing the sounds of his breath when he blew out her candle, and [that] darkness would afterward effectually shield him from detection,” robs Madonna of one of her primary sensory modes of perception (495). Madonna’s vulnerability as a disabled character is exploited; nevertheless, she manages to escape unharmed. Upon hearing her terrified reaction, Mat is forced to empathize with her deafness:

He had not calculated, however, on the serious effect which the success of his stratagem would have on her nerves, for he knew nothing of the horror which the loss of her sense of hearing caused her always to feel when she was left in darkness; and he had not stopped to consider that, by depriving her of her light, he was depriving her of that all-important guiding sense of sight, the loss of which could not supply in the dark, as others could, by the exercise of the ear (495).

Darkness is a problematic space of interaction, for it does not share the same egalitarian qualities as a lighted domain. In Madonna’s case, the loss of one sense cannot be compensated by another. Instead, she is somewhat disadvantaged by her sole reliance on the “all-important guiding sense of light.” Perhaps her aversion to darkness is appropriate then, since noises only seem to leak out at night in the text—she can only be on equal footing with others during the daytime, which provides her with a muted visual field.

Once Mat finally extinguishes the candle, the self-silencing of Madonna’s voice is overcome by terror. In what arguably might be the archetypal melodramatic scene of Hide and Seek, Madonna’s reaction seems to collapse the spectrum of primeval human expression:

She dropped the china candlestick, in a paroxysm of terror. It fell, and broke, with a deadened sound...He had hardly time to hear this happen, before the dumb moaning, the inarticulate cry of fear which was all that the poor panic-stricken girl could utter, rose low, shuddering, and ceaseless, in the darkness—so close to his ear that he fancied he could feel her breath palpitating quick and warm on his cheek (495).

The shattering of the candle, which fell and “broke with a deadened sound” re-performs the tearing of the eardrum and the “deadening” of the hearing organ. Collins’s choice of adjectives to describe Madonna’s sounds encapsulates her Deafness, but also denies her a place in the
discourse of language and syntax. As a “Deaf-mute,” her “moaning” is “dumb,” an “inarticulate cry” which lacks the shape and sophistication of the spoken word. However, despite the barbaric nature of her utterances, her voice is truly expressive, the “degree zero” of the human voice. As a manifest trace of a trauma long embedded, her wail might also prefigure the infantile voice—the bare, elemental materialization of physical need. Madonna’s moaning is also somewhat sexual in nature, for it mimics the orgasmic cry generated from the core that ripples throughout the body. Terror, pleasure and the sublime are rolled up into one, providing Madonna with a fight-or-flight ability to use her touch as a surrogate for her sight. With her heightened sense of tactility, Madonna becomes the embodiment of her hands’ empowered motion.

Although Wilkie Collins seeks to portray Madonna “simply and exactly after Nature,” his language and reductionist take on the “Deaf-mute” undermines his representation. Madonna’s utterances are not mere random sounds; rather, they give expression to a more sophisticated verbalization through the word’s very definition: to utter is to “give expression to, to express, describe, or report in words, to speak of or about, to pronounce,” even meaning insofar as “to make manifest, to disclose or reveal, to show, display or bring to light” (OED). If to utter is to “bring to light,” than perhaps Madonna not only finds illumination in the darkened room through her voice, but also conflates the showing and speaking of words in her voice, which draws from both oral and visual traditions of language. David Wills, whose work on the relationship between the body and word in Prosthesis, structures this linguistic correspondence: “A word returns to the body a sense of possession of the external world that it cannot possess.” 22 Wills’ formulation suggests that Madonna’s utterances reestablish her sense of place and self that she might otherwise glean from her sighted surroundings. Furthermore, if these voice slips arise not

only from Madonna, but also from Zack and Mat, perhaps *Hide and Seek* is inherently a text that structures an embodied, unconscious language. Turning to Lacan’s connection between the language of Deaf and hearing characters, Mitchell and Snyder argue that the “body functions ‘like a language’ as a dynamic network of misfirings and arbitrary adaptations…their disabilities surface to explain everything or nothing with respect to their portraits as embodied beings.”

Indeed, Zack’s ejaculations, Mat’s spasmodic actions, and Madonna’s deathly whimpering generate a “network of [verbal] misfirings and arbitrary adaptations,” their “truant” voices bursting from the surface of their textualized bodies.

Madonna’s presence also makes Mat the Other, for he too is Deafened, not by his own voice, but by Madonna’s. Although the darkness is not quite democratic in the aural sense I discussed earlier, Madonna manages to subvert Mat’s superior position by unconsciously paralyzing him. Her acute awareness of motion makes it a “risk to remain still—a risk to move!” for Mat, who “stood as helpless even as the helpless creature before him” (496). Madonna’s “low, ceaseless, dumb moaning” and Mat’s corporeal immobility also displace his voice, for they “smote so painfully on his heart, roused up so fearfully….that the coldness of sharp mental suffering seized on his limbs, the fever of unutterable expectation parched up his throat, and mouth and lips…(496). Mat is literally disabled by Madonna, placed in a sympathetic position of “mental suffering” that the disabled Victorian body so often exemplifies.

As one who possesses full capacities of hearing and speaking, Mat’s temporal displacement from this sensorial paradigm raises an interesting question: what does it mean to speak, much less to *hear* oneself speak? If speech is tied up with language, then how can we reconcile Madonna’s voice if she cannot truly hear herself, much less sound out her thoughts through a normative oral grammar? Jonathan Rée suggests that the voice “is the place where the

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21 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 50.
inward subjectivity of individual spirits intersects with the social and historical reality of human languages.”24 Rée’s conception of voice encompasses the articulation of words and natural sounds, but also emphasizes the importance of the breath, or, “the spirit of life” as the vehicle that communicates the human soul. The voice is contradictory, for it is individual and collective, latent and explicit, emotive and communicative. The voice of *Hide and Seek*, however, is textual, encoded in the black letters, only imagined and spoken in the reader’s mind. Jacques Derrida corroborates the belief that the voice figures the self as an ear, writing that “Hearing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed in upon itself; it is the irreducible openness in the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech.”25 Derrida’s formulation makes the swift transition from hearing, and the ear, to the “eye and the world within speech.” Perhaps this jump is a bit forced, since he presumes an unbroken relay from tongue to ear, which cannot be the case for the Deaf. However, self-overhearing is what distinguishes Mat and Zack from Madonna; it does not necessarily indicate their continuity of speech—in fact, their overhearing seems to interrupt it. *Hide and Seek* undermines Derrida’s claim for a fluidity between voice, hearing and self-recognition, rather, the novel prefers to isolate them as self-contained modalities that occasionally leak into each other, often with dramatic consequences.

By segregating the various devices we use to mediate the world of sound in *Hide and Seek*, Wilkie Collins not only demonstrates how the Deaf are treated in a hearing world, but he also demarcates, closes off and even empties out the ear as a vestigial organ. The text displaces the ear as the open vessel, structuring what Lennard Davis calls the “Deafened moment.”26 A

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hearing person raised by Deaf parents, Davis himself is an appropriate critic to describe the unique dynamic between Mat/Zack and Madonna, for he too admits to being deafened despite his capacity to hear. In keeping with the discussion of the voice, hearing and sound, Davis offers a useful model for how we might better comprehend this unusual sphere of sound: “the deaf moment…overtly presents itself as the inability to follow the text’s sonic presence, silence, duration in time, breath, voice, and ideologically ratified forms of conversation.”

Although Mat and Zack are able to participate in and generate the text’s “sonic presence,” their auditory exchange is meaningless to the reader, who can neither speak nor converse with the characters within the text. Remarkably, the reader truly engenders the “deaf moment.” Davis opens up the literary canon to disability theory, proposing that deafness is inherent to the text:

> All readers are deaf because they are defined by a process that does not require hearing or speaking (vocalizing). The sign language they are participating in is one that uses marks of ink on paper….Reading is a silent process…this is a moment of disability.

If reading is a “silent process,” then the sounds and voices of *Hide and Seek* not only reify the text as *ekphrasis*, but as *inverse ekphrasis*—the mute speaking picture. Davis’s radical conception encourages readers to participate in the world of disability, essentially leveling the playing field and creating a scaffold for a collective, democratic language. Writing is the paradigmatic democratic plane: it lays flat and open on the surface of a page, characterized by a free and equal choice on the part of the reader to read and engage with the text. Furthermore, the reader is left to his or her own devices to imagine how story might look and sound.

From a critical standpoint, I too perpetuate the “deafened moment” as one who engages in a reciprocal, but silent dialectic with *Hide and Seek*. As reader/writer/critic, I not only assimilate the text’s muted voice, but I also converse with it, tease out its intricacies from the

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words imprinted on this page. My own real-life deafness coerces me to look closer at the text—what do the words show? How do the words play off and resonate/reverberate with one another? What are the visual patterns and repetitions? What do the words mask or reveal? In effect, the deafened moment embodies the process of textuality, which seems to take on a sensual tactility—we can see and touch the pages and words, and how they fit within the overall work.

However, we must also consider that *Hide and Seek* does not always advocate for a democratic language, rather, it takes up stereotypical social views of the Deaf as part of its historical context. The writings about the Deaf in the mid-seventeenth century England heavily influenced a more progressive nineteenth century Victorian society. As a result, we can still find traces of reluctance to accept Deaf individuals into society at large in Collins’s writing. Collins even takes up the subject of Deaf education with Madonna, who is coerced by her surrogate parents and doctor to continue speaking once she loses her hearing. Her hearing loss becomes an index of her mental capacities, a predictor that her intelligence will only deteriorate.

Unfortunately, the ability to speak equates to intelligence, and Madonna is pigeonholed as another member of the “Deaf-and-dumb” coterie. Diagnosing Madonna’s Deafness as irreparable, the doctor advises Madonna’s caregiver in a paternalistic tone:

> I hope the poor child is too young to suffer much mental misery under her dreadful misfortune. Keep her amused, and keep her talking, if you possibly can—though I doubt very much whether, in a little time, you won’t fail completely getting her to speak at all (136).

The doctor presumes that Madonna’s quality of life will be poor, riddled with “mental misery.” Despite his lack of optimism for Madonna’s education and participation in the hearing world, the doctor advocates a rigorous oral education. Mrs. Peckover recalls the doctor’s pedagogical advice and her moral dilemma over Madonna’s schooling:
He told me I should find her grow more and more unwilling to speak every day, just for the shocking reason that she couldn’t hear a single word she said, or a single tone of her own voice. He warned me that she was already losing the wish and the want to speak; and that it would very soon be little short of absolute pain to her to be made to say even a few words; but he begged and prayed me not to let my good-nature get the better of my prudence on that account, and not to humor her, however tempted I might feel to do so—for if I did, she would be dumb as well as deaf …“So, once again,” says he, “mind you make her use her voice. Don’t give her dinner, unless she asks for it. Treat her severely in that way, poor little soul. Because it’s for her own good” (138).

Without a functional ear to guide her voice, Madonna can literally no longer be receptive to oral language. In fact, speaking becomes painful for Madonna once she no longer feels ownership over a voice that is now “hoarse and low, and deep and faint; the strangest shockingest voice” (131). Madonna’s relinquishing of speech is unacceptable in the doctor’s eyes; he takes an autocratic position, demanding Mrs. Peckover to “make her use her voice,” with the threat of punishment if Madonna chooses otherwise. Involuntary silence is unacceptable, and Madonna is represented as a victim of language.

The pedantic, almost dictatorial enforcement of oral language positions Madonna outside of language, marking her as the linguistic Other. Jennifer L. Nelson and Bradley S. Berens adopt Stephen Greenblatt’s notion of “linguistic colonialism” to explain the Deaf culture’s status as a linguistic minority, for they are the target of “the imposition of another, foreign, language.” Madonna is described by Collins as an outcast, “exiled from the worlds of sound and speech,” while also further alienated as the linguistically colonized (171). Harlan Lane in the *Mask of Benevolence* labels this overbearing nature as “audism,” which is “the hearing way of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the deaf community.” In taking such an aggressive stance in Deaf education, individuals such as the doctor and Mrs. Peckover believe they are somehow remedying a “problem,” attempting to overcompensate for a lack. But the

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Deaf also provide a blank slate, offering unlimited possibilities for others to test and to reaffirm the basic tenets of the English language. Thus, the Deaf are denied their own voice in the literary canon and are almost absent from literary history in comparison to other physical disabilities.

Nelson and Berens struggle with this disconcerting fact:

Representation of the Deaf within mainstream literature is a Catch-22: we can only “know them through these writings, yet writing about the Deaf and educating them through the English language “shapes” them for consumption by a hearing audience. We cannot know them as Deaf because their deafness is distorted into something that mirrors the hearing world and its dominant language…The hearing impose their subjectivity onto the Deaf in the act of inscription, and therefore the Deaf are always rewritten as lacking, soulless, or primitive.\textsuperscript{31}

On one hand it is valuable to consider the possibility that we can never truly know the Deaf “as Deaf” from an audist perspective of written language, but on the other hand, writing itself structures a language of signs that in some respects, is modeled after Deaf sign language. Deaf subjectivity is derived from the act of inscription, regardless if it may be through the hearing writer’s hands or not. Madonna is the antithesis of Nelson and Berens’ formulation—she is the soul that drives Hide and Seek’s narrative, and her centrality will subvert her initial subjugation under linguistic colonialism.

Madonna is not pushed to the wayside like the Deaf literary characters that came before; rather, she creates her own margins and closes off others. Throwing off the fetters of oral language, Madonna finds empowerment through the reversed role of colonizer, for Mrs. Peckover’s husband finally lets her “have her own will in everything” (139). Madonna takes to writing as her primary means of communication, even coming up with the idea of a writing slate, which hangs at her side. Madonna’s contentment with her means of communication alleviates Mrs. Peckover’s concerns, demonstrating “that people afflicted with such stone deafness as hers

\textsuperscript{31} Nelson and Berens, “Spoken Daggers, Deaf Ears, and Silent Mouths,” 69.
didn’t feel the loss of speech…they took to making signs, and writing...as a sort of second nature” (141). From this moment on, it seems as if Madonna orchestrates the language around her, and her remarkable capacity to render others speechless, urging them to write on her slate, and later to sign, reifies her reclamation of language. However, Madonna’s role as colonizer often threatens to be undermined by her creator, Wilkie Collins, who cannot seem to overcome his paternalistic inclinations to render her in a sentimental, albeit sympathetic light. Collins’s narrative voice is overtly biased and emotional, and his “possessive” empathy often threatens to counteract Madonna’s progressive autonomy from social norms.

The interpolation between author and character is a fault of the melodramatic genre, and Collins must necessarily portray Madonna as a pitiful figure to keep within the more restrictive traditions of the novel. In this respect, Madonna is “shaped for consumption” for the Victorian reader, posited as a mere object of fetishization in a circus show. Indeed, Collins is the circus promoter who publicizes the spectacle of “THE MYSTERIOUS FOUNDLING! AGED TEN YEARS!! TOTALLY DEAF AND DUMB!!!” as the proprietor of Madonna’s visual and textual exhibition. Collins often uses excessive hyperbole, somewhat exploitatively, to advertise Madonna’s “true” nature:

Ah, woeful sight! So lovely, yet so piteous to look on! Shall she never hear the kindly human voices…silent forever to her?…the young, tender life be forever a speechless thing, shut up in dumbness form the free world of voices? Oh! Angel of judgment! Hast thou snatched her hearing and her speech from this little child, to abandon her in helpless affliction to such profanation as she now undergoes? (84)

A “speechless thing,” “shut up in dumbness,” an abandoned figure of “helpless affliction,” Madonna becomes a commodity of sadistic pleasure. She is the figure of “picturesque
affliction,” what Martha Stoddard Holmes defines as a “[body] distinctive enough to ‘speak’ without words.” Melodrama’s construction of the “picturesque affliction” not only significantly relates to the picture, but also demonstrates that language/narrative in melodrama is inherently graphic or vivid enough to evoke a mental image. “Picturesque affliction” is contradictory, for the distress attributed to affliction should ethically disrupt the pleasure experienced upon a picturesque view. Madonna is an overwrought figure, glossed in such a sympathetic sheen by Collins’s words that she is packaged up in his verbal trappings. Collins temporarily assimilates the voice of the artist, for like Valentine Blyth, he too is enraptured by his visual subject. As the “textual spectacle” of Hide and Seek, Madonna is the lens through which the text and the image are magnified and framed. The melodramatic stage is absorbed into the text as a scaffold that invites seeing, reading and visual interpretation of the figure of sound gone “AWOL,” or absent without leave.

I wish to return to the pictorial criteria put forth by Hide and Seek in a move that might allow us to locate the voice and self-identity as inherently textual rather than oral. As the participating and spectral audience of the melodramatic scaffold, we are held captive by the spectacle of the text, our eyes mesmerized by the picture it projects. What the “textual spectacle” presents then, is a philological and philosophical model that Wittgenstein might have agreed with, claiming that “a picture [holds] us captive. And we [can] not get outside it, for it [lies] in our language and language seems to repeat it to us inexorably.” Returning to the ut pictura poesis equation, Wittgenstein’s proposal that language structures the picture, and reciprocally, the picture structures language, suggests that the sister arts are inextricably linked,

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32 Martha Stoddard Holmes. Fictions of Affliction, 23.
but in chiasmus.\textsuperscript{34} If language can be conceived as intrinsically pictorial, then Valentine Blyth appropriately shapes Madonna’s language through the “A B C’s of Art,” also employing artistic language as a surrogate for her voice (189). Although Valentine’s voice isn’t always used explicitly, his artistic lexicon is taken up in our introduction to Madonna:

> It is impossible to describe how deliciously soft, bright, fresh, pure, and delicate this young lady is, merely as an object to look at…The keenest observers, beholding her as she present appears, would detect nothing in her face or figure, her manner or her costume, in the slightest degree suggestive of impenetrable mystery or incurable misfortune (64).

Although Madonna is a mere aesthetic “object to look at,” she is paradoxically also “impossible to describe.” Description straddles the artistic and writing processes, defined as “verbal representation or portraiture; the act of writing down, inscription” (OED). Madonna cannot be visually rendered through words, yet she can be articulated by Valentine Blyth’s artistic hand within the story. Madonna’s visage also effectively congeals her outward appearance as hermetically sealed, conveniently providing her with a shell, which covers over her “impenetrable secrets.” As a paragon of beauty, an idealized statue of sorts, Madonna’s asexuality is emblematic of the “Virgin Mary” or the pristine “Madonna.” Madonna embodies the artistic ideal as “the nearest living approach they had ever seen to that immortal ‘Madonna’ face, which has forever associated the idea of beauty with the name RAPHAEL. The resemblance struck everybody alike…” (67). To emphasize the embeddedness of art history within Madonna’s character, the Virgin Mary’s image is pervasive in \textit{Hide and Seek}, whether

\textsuperscript{34} As mentioned earlier, this model of \textit{ut pictura poesis} enumerates the differences between the sister arts—between poetry and the visual arts. According to the Grove Art Dictionary, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the so-called “authority” on the sister-arts, produced \textit{Laokoon} (1766)—“an extended polemic on the confusion of the visual arts with poetry. According to Lessing, painting and poetry operate in different dimensions, employ incommensurable means and have distinct subject-matters. Painting extends through space and uses form and colour to depict material entities; poetry extends through time and uses articulated sounds to represent sequential action and abstract ideas.”
through allegorical descriptions of Madonna, or located in the novel’s products of art. Ironically, the ubiquity of the Madonna as such a publicized emblem is in stark contrast with the dearth of Deaf characters in literary history.

Madonna is not just the subject (or object) of the painting, she also generates a picturesque background. Her descriptions often arise out of an “accidental moment” in which all the elements of nature seem to fall together harmoniously. Madonna is provided with “accessories of light and shade and background garden objects [that] beautifully and tenderly fill up the scene” (105). These objects not only color Madonna in a more humane light, but they also “fill up” and smooth over her deficiencies. This painted scene provides “a picture which it was a luxury to be able to look on, which it seemed a little short of an absolute profanation to disturb” (105). Indeed, we are invited repeatedly to look at Madonna as a “textual spectacle” in close, meticulously detailed framings. In *The Language of Images*, W.J.T. Mitchell discusses how visual representations are already “immanent in words, in the fabric of description, narrative ‘vision,’ represented objects and places, metaphor…even typography, paper, binding.”35 But how can we negotiate Valentine Blyth’s role as painter if he is represented by the text itself? At the very surface of the text, both painter and author discourse in a silent language of signs, for as Mitchell claims, “both poet and painter want to reach the silence behind the language, the silence within the language.”36 This assertion is particularly insightful, not only reiterating the inverse *ekphrasis* taking place in the visual language, but also indicating that *Hide and Seek* is inherently a Deaf text, consistently preserving and seeking silence.

Valentine Blyth’s artistic sensibility screens over Madonna’s disability, and her flaws are disguised by means of textual illusion. Conversely, if Madonna’s Deafness constitutes and

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contributes to the “textual spectacle,” then her disability is what “inaugurates the act of interpretation” by inviting the inquisitive gaze. The “textual spectacle’s” function, then, is what David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder call “narrative prosthesis.” In effect, Mitchell and Snyder’s argument that the author’s effort to “narrate disability’s myriad deviations is an attempt to bring the body’s unruliness under control” seems to correspond with Madonna’s representation in art historical terms. Madonna is painted in various shades and colors, shapes and words, seeming to provide unlimited possibilities for metaphorical constructions and euphemisms of her condition. What might be a drawing out of her “myriad deviations” might also be an attempt to bring her “under control,” or, it might also serve as an explicit and honest depiction of her difference. Madonna is a mirage, and Valentine’s artistic rendering of her is “in a literal sense a prosthesis [that] seeks to accomplish an illusion. [Her] body is deemed lacking, dysfunctional, or inappropriately functional [that] needs compensation, and prosthesis helps effect his end.” Indeed, Madonna is an alluring, shimmering “illusion” that is “inappropriately functional” to the degree that she successfully performs as a spectacle, but one that has been slightly distorted. We are intrigued by what deviates from the norm, thus the “textual spectacle” is as an index for both Madonna’s difference and idealization. In terms of Mitchell and Snyder’s “narrative prosthesis,” Madonna’s location in art advocates Hide and Seek’s moral: “Difference demands display, and display demands difference.” The pictorial nature of the text enables the “prosthesis,” as figured by the image, to supplement the word and to bridge the disjunction between painting and text.

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40 Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 55.
W.J.T. Mitchell turns to the *ut pictura poesis* formulation to tease out these differences between the disciplines of literature and painting, suggesting that these arts are not “purely symmetrical. It seems easier for painting to re-present and incorporate textuality in a quite literal way than for the reverse to happen.” Perhaps Mitchell’s argument holds some weight, because Collins himself is not content just to draw pictures with his words, but to literally draw the scene at hand. *Hide and Seek* includes nine illustrations, each which seems to fall conveniently in the text at moments when words might fail to convey the emotional impact. Both Zack and Madonna are introduced in these extraneous illustrations: Zack as a child is led forcibly by the hand by an adult, and young Madonna is similarly led by hand into the circus ring (See Appendix II). “To lead by hand” not only presages the importance of gesture and body language as the *manuscript*—the literal writing of/ by the hand— in the latter portion of *Hide and Seek*, but it also illustrates the parallelism between Madonna and Zack. The illustrations themselves are in black ink, shaded by matrices of crisscrossing lines and patterns. Text accompanies these plates, with a short inscription delineating the excerpt of the text being illustrated. Although Zack and Madonna are both “led by hand,” the pictures suggest differently—Zack is resistant, dragging his heels, and Madonna is willing and complicit. Zack’s hands are held tightly, and his other hand attempts to pry his fingers free, whereas Madonna’s hand is held openly and gently by the circus master, her other hand opened outwards, encouraging the audience to give herself their own hands. The linkage of hands signals a nexus in the text for which Zack and Madonna’s physical connection can figuratively be established. Mitchell’s exegesis of how illustrations function within a text as both an independent and supplementary medium reinforces the nature of *ut pictura poesis*: “thus a sequence of plates and their appended texts generate two complementary

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codes running on parallel tracks, each holding the key to deciphering the other.“[42] If the texts and the illustrations decode one another, then perhaps the secret of *Hide and Seek* can be found at these critical junctions where text and image intersect.

These tableaux also provide the backdrop to the “textual spectacle,” manifesting the melodramatic importance of the particular text it demarcates. Indeed, the initial pictures of Zack and Madonna are conflated in the third illustration, in which Zack is drawn in the act of “taking Madonna’s hand, and kissing it with boisterous fondness” (181). Madonna, appropriately, is sitting at her drawing table, working on her own piece of art. Zack and Madonna are linked together in the artist’s studio while the painter, Valentine Blyth, oversees the scene. In a triangular staging, the reader is drawn to Valentine’s eyes, which, coincidently, are the only eyes open and available to us. The artistic viewpoint, which is such a seminal force in shaping the visuality of the text, is transferred onto the readers, who might see the text as a simulacrum of the painting. If text becomes painting and painting becomes text, the “narrative prosthesis” becomes so interfused with the text that “it would even be difficult to say exactly where any given image is; in the ‘text-as-event,’ the borders between viewer and text, subject and object, inside and outside, become porous.”[43] The notion of the text as an illusion, the place where deafness and language “become porous,” exchanging certain qualities with one another, emphasizes that the “text-as-event” predates the “textual spectacle.”

Perhaps the most interesting illustration depicts Madonna’s entrapment in another art studio, but one that is pitch black. Paradoxically, the illustration provides a moment of *illumination*, essentially placing a private spotlight on the scene unavailable to the characters within. The drawing violates the physical reality of seeing, but it embodies the revelatory

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moment of “blindness” in the text that Collins meticulously lays out for us. Although Collins writes out of the darkness from Madonna’s standpoint, while trying to write the reader in to enable a voyeuristic position, the tracks of decipherment come to a halt. How can we see Madonna if she cannot see herself? The democratic plane tilts here, privileging the reader and author’s vision. What is unique to this unframed illustration amongst others is the lack of any definitive border. The edges are softened, as if we too struggle to see into the gloom. The drawing employs a complex structure of specularity between Madonna, Mat and the reader. The importance of gesture, posture and position illustrate a theatricality that provides a domain for the enactment of sign language. According to Mitchell, language becomes ‘literally’ visible in two ways: “in the medium of writing, and in the utterances of gesture language, the visible language of the Deaf.” These series of illustrations make visible Collins’s writing in imagistic terms, as well as the language of gesture; they also encapsulate Madonna’s dual modes of communication, as expressed through writing and sign language.

At the secondary level of Hide and Seek’s narration, Wilkie Collins’s inverse ekphrasis ventriloquizes Madonna’s voice through writing. Turning to writing itself as a “prosthesis” for Madonna’s voice, the act of marking down the self not only constructs Madonna as a textually marked body, but also as one whose voice speaks through the hand. The moment following the discovery of Madonna’s Deafness signals her transmutation into the realm of writing; however, her disability is literally imprinted on the paper not by her own hand, but by the doctor’s. Madonna, who is perplexed and alarmed is informed by her doctor, who “writes down on the paper in large letters: You Are Deaf,” and holds the note up to her eyes (134). In a move evocative of audism, Madonna’s disability is prescribed to her by another; but this remarkable display requires a necessary reciprocity, for her Deafness cannot be linguistically affirmed until

44 Mitchell, Picture Theory, 99.
she reads it herself. Madonna’s identity is rewritten, encapsulated in the signs of letters that show her what she cannot hear. Madonna cannot know the word “Deaf” through any other medium but writing, and she can only read herself and others in her surroundings.

Collins allows Madonna to claim ownership of her Deafness through her own writing capacities. Indeed, Madonna expresses “some little triumph at showing she could write too” when her slate becomes a locus for the exchange of reading and writing in which a textual discourse emerges (107). In effect, Madonna offers herself as a figure to be written on, for others in *Hide and Seek* and for Collins himself. For instance, Madonna’s friends cannot quite grasp Madonna’s inability to participate orally in their conversation:

> They talked to her eagerly, as if she could hear and answer them—while she, on her part, stood looking alternately from one to the other, watching their lips and eyes intently, and still holding out the slate, with her innocent gesture of invitation and gentle look of apology, for the eldest girl to write on (104).

Madonna cannot easily negotiate the multiple fields of vision here, looking back and forth while watching their eyes and lips for visual clues. Eyes and lips are physical nodes that provide Madonna with information as coordinates that can be read for corporeal expression. Communication slows on the plane of the writing slate, for Madonna can watch all the signs unfold before her eyes, while in turn responding to these words on the same surface. Her body is a figurative writing integument, a blank slate that *Hide and Seek*’s narrative revolves around, and one from which Collins’s words materializes.

Writing and reading are complementary processes that encode and decipher signs, as well as encapsulate the imagined voice. Lennard J. Davis suggests “the metonymy of pen and tongue again connects writing to deafness…translating experiential reality into textual signs.”45 However, Davis’s conception of the “metonymy of pen and tongue” is controversial, for others.

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like Derrida might argue that writing signals the “death of speech” as an exercise that alienates
the voice. Davis’s and Derrida’s polarized formulations might be useful in establishing writing
as a middle ground, the intersection between image and voice, a *representation*, or translation of
speech. Employing a system of signs, writing allows for the surplus of meanings and
configurations, and even seems to contain all the manifestations of language:

> Now we tend to say “writing” for all that and more: to designate not only the physical
gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what
makes it possible; and also beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus
we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or
not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice….  

In unpacking Derrida’s “writing” as the “totality of what makes it possible,” writing functions at
the surface level of its own inscription, as well as the level of meaning it projects; in the authorial
process, one also reciprocally *reads* and cerebrates language cogently. What we might take from
words as both the signifier and signified is that Madonna’s writing is in effect her *sign language,*
“a language of mute signs.” Collins shapes Madonna’s voice, whose language is displayed
through her own *handwriting,* and her performance of hand gesture.

I have traced Madonna’s evolution from object to subject through various mediums and
dimensions, moving from the illusionistic silent image to the flat writing slate. Rebuilt from
scratch, Madonna’s language takes formative shape as a “speech act,” a performance that
embodies the “textual spectacle” played out on the theatrical scaffold, courtesy of the
melodramatic genre. The sign language of the Deaf structures a natural mode of human
expression, capable of producing its own “body” of literature. But sign language, as a form of
pantomime is also capable of producing an overwrought performance of melodrama: body

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movements are often intentionally superfluous and embellished as an inherent characteristic of such a dynamic language. Thus, sign language’s unique linguistic formula convinces me that it is most appropriate as the final, and all-encompassing medium of language not only for Madonna, but also for the narration of Hide and Seek. Dirksen Bauman provides an exemplary description of sign language’s function in the text: “This body of literature is, rather, a literature of the body that transforms the linear model of speech and writing into an open linguistic field of vision, time, space and the body.”

The Deaf live in a perpetual theater in which the concomitants (space, time, setting, and the body) intrinsic to gesture engender the constant motion of Hide and Seek’s “actors” in a three-dimensional space. In fact, Madonna seems to move fluidly between writing and sign language, conflating them as one when she “made signs for the slate” (107). In gesturing, or making a sign for the slate, Madonna literally brings writing closer to her body, investing it with an immediacy and urgency usually attributed to the voice.

Madonna’s system of gestures is hybrid: her hand movements take the shape of signs that are both her own creation and derived from the standard “deaf and dumb alphabet.” The implication of this new language for Madonna and her intimate circle takes on the significance of a forward thinking “reform,” especially one that seems to be an openly accepted aid. However, Madonna does not take up the finger alphabet by her own incentive—her adoptive father considers gestures as “a means of extending her faculties of social communication,” and Madonna is “instructed in the deaf and dumb alphabet by Valentine’s directions; he and his wife of course, learn[ed] it also; and many of their intimate friends, who were often in the house, follow[ed] their example for Madonna’s sake” (172). The education of finger spelling does not take on the taint of linguistic colonialism earlier enforced on Madonna, for the involvement of others as participants in a communal learning environment makes gesture a truly equalizing,

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49 H. Dirksen L. Bauman, The Disability Studies Reader, 316.
shared language. Even Zack takes to finger spelling with great enthusiasm, “transferring his superlatives to his fingers, communicating them to Madonna through the medium of the deaf and dumb alphabet” (185). Perhaps part of Zack and Valentine’s eagerness to absorb this new corporeal alphabet stems from their pursuit of other artistic mediums of expression.

However, Madonna does not give preference to sign language, and threatens to transgress the social conception of the “Deaf and Dumb” figure. Her unconformity with the taxonomy of the Deaf supplements the already deviant nature of the novel: “oddly enough, however, she frequently preferred to express herself, or to be addressed by others, according to the clumsier and slower system of signs and writing, to which she had been accustomed to from childhood” (173). Perhaps Madonna is not truly enmeshed in Deaf culture, as one whom chooses to migrate between language boundaries to create her own linguistic sphere. Yet, Madonna still relies on “signs” of her own formulated hand movements to convey simple messages. These manual motions correspond with John Bulwer’s endorsement for gestures (and sign language) as a powerful rhetorical device.\(^\text{50}\)

In “Bulwer’s Speaking Hands: Deafness and Rhetoric,” Jennifer L. Nelson quotes Bulwer’s discourse on the capabilities of the hands in elocution: “And as we can translate a thought into discoursing signs, so the conceptions of our mind are seen to abound in several dialects while the articulated fingers supply the office of a voice.”\(^\text{51}\) In conjunction with the vivid facial expression that structures the grammar and syntax of speech and writing, sign language provides multiple planes for translation and “dialects.” Madonna’s fingers supplant her voice, which allow her to see herself speak, and thus reaffirm her active participation within her social community.

\(^\text{50}\) John Bulwer was a critic of rhetoric who was best known for his 1644 *Chirologia* and *Chironmia*, which deal with the various gestures used in public speaking, as well as bodily expression and motion. He privileged and even validated the Deaf for their unique sign language.

A demonstration of the “textual spectacle,” sign language is remarkably similar to painting and writing. Employing the upper body to draw lines in the air, using hands and fingers as colorful brushstrokes, and imaginatively molding space, signers leave their audience with an ephemeral picture. Comparing Sign literature and sign language, Bauman writes:

As a visual performance art, Sign literature may bear more similarity to painting, dance, drama, film and video than to poetry or fiction. A “line” in sign poetry, for example, might be more accurately modeled after the concept of the “line” in painting….52

Although *Hide and Seek* is essentially composed of words and pages, its use of figural language and art within the narrative seems loosely constructed on sign literature as an enactment of Madonna’s “portraiture.” Bauman rejects Sign literature’s similarity to poetry and fiction, for its “line” is organic and multidimensional rather than linear. Sign literature is a “product of hearing/Deaf borderlands,” positing it in distinct relation to the medium of the novel, for the “term ‘literature’ derives from the Latin *litere*, or ‘letter’.”53 To sign is to letter out in visible, tangible terms. Signing translates the text into a living, mutable corpus situated a three-dimensional visual field.

However, Bauman raises some interesting issues with Sign literature in respect to gender and the male gaze (as figured by Wilkie Collin’s pen, Valentine and Zack’s brushes, and Mat’s eyes). If Madonna is the center of the “textual spectacle” which I suggested earlier as a position of empowerment, perhaps we might consider an opposing viewpoint: “Sign, in a more graphic way, perhaps, than *l’écriture feminine* is a ‘writing [of/on] the body.’ Does the four-dimensional space of performance offer ways of deconstructing phallogocentric linear discourse?”54 Indeed, as a work written by a man, *Hide and Seek* is a “phallogocentric linear discourse,” a text that

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53 Bauman, 322.
54 Bauman, 320.
follows a linear narrative in which Collins symbolically writes “of/on the body” of Madonna. We might reflect with Bauman, “how does the gender of the signer influence the reading/viewing of the “text” itself? How does the male gaze construct the female body/text? Can gender ever be bracketed out of a reading of a Sign performance?” Stepping back, *Hide and Seek* is not just a “textual spectacle”; it also necessarily exploits Madonna as the object of exhibition. However, Madonna’s reciprocal gaze, which looks at bodies in order to read them, rather than to simply look for pleasure, endows her with her own “l’écriture feminine”—the capacity to write on the bodies of others. Regardless of her gender, Madonna’s body, or the Deaf body, cannot resist what feminists might consider a visual fetishization. In fact, disability studies insists, inclusive of the Deaf, that the body must consciously occupy a perpetual state of embodiment within a visual field—it is a locus, a site for the enforcement of normality and “correction.” Madonna cannot be anything but a body, insofar as she is a person signified by her sign-making hands.

At the surface, *Hide and Seek* is a novel of secrets that depends wholly on the silence of the text to keep the mystery of Madonna’s genealogy buried. Madonna is protected from the knowledge of her birth because of her Deafness, nor can she tell her own secret in a voice that could be heard. This tautology is essentially a melodramatic, Victorian moment, made more provocative by the pressing issues raised by the visible and invisible in the Deaf economy of language. Lennard J. Davis clarifies this tension: “Deafness, in effect, is a reminder of the

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55 Bauman, 320.
56 The Deaf culture would argue that they are not inclusive in the larger group classification as “disabled,” rather, they are a minority separate—not “deficient” in any shape or form.
57 In Lennard Davis’s essay “Constructing Normalcy” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, the word “normal” as ‘constituting, conforming to, not deviating or different from, the common type or standard, regular, usual’ only enters the English language around 1840” (10). Davis also remarks on the concept of normal as “imperative,” for “deviance” is dangerous. Similarly, as female, Madonna might be argued to have a double strike against her, and thus, must forge her own corporeal identity as outside the patriarchal norm.
‘hearingness’ of narrative. It is the aporetic black hole that leads to a new kind of deconstruction of narrativity.” 58 In a move reminiscent of deconstruction that gestures to the broader theoretical implications, I argue that *Hide and Seek* takes up language as the cipher through its secretive nature: in order to reconstruct from the positive absence of the voice, the structure of language must be unraveled, collapsed—rendered at “degree zero.” Thus, in juxtaposition with the sporadic irruptions of her ghostly voice out of the text—the “hearingness of the narrative”—Madonna’s secret is suppressed with her oral voice.

The responsibility of keeping a secret rests with its owner, but in a game of Hide-and-Seek, additional parties are involved to keep hidden what can no longer be a true “secret.” Ironically, Madonna’s adoptive father asserts control over the history of Madonna’s “missing” parentage, covertly linked with her former caregiver, Mrs. Peckover. Valentine’s obsession with keeping Madonna’s history an ellipsis provokes Mrs. Peckover to chastise him: “Properly hidden, did you say, sir? Of course I keep what I know properly hidden, for of course I can hold my tongue. In my time, sir, it used always to take two parties to play at a game of Hide-and-seek” (175). If to “properly hide” is to “hold [one’s] tongue” from an auditory standpoint, than secrets are presumed to be tied up in the voice. However, this logic is fallible for the reader can literally see the secret in the silent text. Mrs. Peckover and Valentine Blyth fail to take into account that secrets might not just be revealed in a voice that others can hear, but that they can be shown upon the proper decoding of a visual rebus. Mrs. Peckover’s “Hush! Don’t say a word” is an ineffectual imperative here, for *Hide and Seek* is a narrative about the mastery of seeking/seeing the secret (250). *Hide and Seek* materializes the textual discourse, for in reading we must seek-and-find the threads, patterns, and subtleties woven into the pages.

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The silencing of voices in Collins’s novel acts to cloak language as one who would draw a curtain over a spectacle. For the reader however, the cloaking of language merely points to the moments in the text where the author or characters seek to preserve the mystery. In *A Theory of Literary Production*, Pierre Macherey probes the implications of what it means for a narrative to hold silence as the center and principle of expression. First, Macherey’s claim that “the speech of a book comes from a certain silence…to reach utterance, all speech envelops itself in the unspoken,” relocates the reader in the “Deafened moment.” If the “unspoken” is what shapes all speech, than perhaps Madonna’s muted voice is a paradigmatic construction of the text’s voice as well. In *Hide and Seek*, silence is primeval; it is the inchoate space, the fragile utopia that comes to be profaned by noise. Second, Macherey’s pointed query into whether silence can speak, or be made to speak, touches upon the notion of *inverse ekphrasis*—the speaking picture that is muted. According to Macherey, “the silence is doing the speaking,” or rather, the signs of hands, words and pictures within *Hide and Seek* speak on behalf of the silence. Silence is invested in every valence of Collins’s novel, to the degree that it becomes surplus, and its excess uncovers what it cannot say. Finally, with manifold layers of silence saturating the various artistic mediums, *Hide and Seek* urges us to disinter what is hidden within the letter, the word, the sign, the image, the page, and book itself. In effect, the game of Hide-and-seek is one of circular causality: to hide is to keep out of sight, or to show without being seen, and reciprocally, what is hidden invites the seeking and inevitable, unconscious desire to be found.

In closing, and in the spirit of theatrical gesture in Shakespearean drama, we “are now out of our text. But/ We will draw the curtain and show you the picture.” In moving beyond the critical discourse confined to the page of *Hide and Seek*, the “textual spectacle” of the sign

60 Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, 86.
language of Madonna’s narrative takes the stage. The signs for hide and seek (as separate words) more definitively visually enact what is at stake in Wilkie Collins’s novel. For “hide,” the right fist placed against the lower lip is swung under a left hand, palm down in one fluid motion. “Secret” and “under” are conflated into one sign here, and the secret itself is indicated as coming from the mouth. What the “hide” sign beautifully illustrates then, is inverse ekphrasis—the secret arises from the mouth, yet it is not spoken, but seen. The sign for “seek” consists of a right hand shaped in a “C” that makes a counterclockwise twofold circular motion in front of the face. Particularly for this sign, the gaze and the squinting expression that follow and “seek” the gesture demarcate the importance of the visual field. When put together, “hide” and “seek” are both linked and divided by the flat palm that might denote the curtain, the cloak or even the tympan. The hand does not cover wholly—it is a superficial shroud that ironically shows what is underneath. This is the hand of Wilkie Collins, who has uncovered, screened and “played” with the Deaf voice through the performance of his pen.

Appendix I

Wilkie Collins’s personal footnote (Hide and Seek, 165):

I do not know that any attempt has yet been made in English fiction to draw the character of a “Deaf-Mute” simply and exactly after nature, or, in other words, to exhibit the peculiar effects produced by the loss of the sense of hearing and speaking on the disposition of the person so afflicted. The famous Fenella, in Scott’s Peveril of the Peak,” only assumes deafness and dumbness, and the whole family of dumb people on the stage have the remarkable faculty—so far as my experience goes—of always being able to hear what is said to them. When the idea first occurred to me of representing the character of a “Deaf-Mute” as literally as possible according to nature, I found the difficulty of getting at tangible and reliable materials to work from much greater than I had anticipated; so much greater, indeed, that I believe my design must
have been abandoned, if a lucky chance had not thrown in my way Dr. Kitto’s delightful little book, “The Lost Senses.” In the first division of that work, which contains the author’s interesting and touching narrative of his own sensations under a total loss of the sense of hearing, and its consequent effect on the faculties of speech, will be found my authority for most of those traits in Madonna’s character which are especially and immediately connected with the deprivation from which she is represented as suffering. The moral purpose to be answered by the introduction of such a personage as this, and of the kindred character of the painter’s wife, lies, I would fain hope, so plainly on the surface, that it can be hardly necessary for me to indicate it even to the most careless reader. I know of nothing which more firmly supports our faith in the better parts of human nature, than to see—as we all may—with what patience and cheerfulness the heavier bodily afflictions of humanity are borne, for the most part, by those afflicted; and also to note what elements of kindness and gentleness the spectacle of these afflictions constantly develops in the persons of the little circle by which the sufferer is surrounded. Here is the ever bright side, the ever noble and consoling aspect of all human calamity; and the object of presenting this to the view of others as truly and as tenderly as in him lies, seems to me to be a fit object for any writer who desires to address himself to the best sympathies of his readers.

Appendix II
He led with him, holding her hand, the little deaf and dumb girl whose misfortunes he had advertised to the whole population of Rumbleford.—Hide-and-Seek, Vol. XI, page 81.
KEEPING WELL BEHIND HER, HE SLEW OUT HER CANDLE JUST AS SHE WAS RAISING IT OVER HER HEAD AND LOOKING INTENTLY ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF HER.—HIDE-AND-SEEK, Vol. XI., page 495.
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