



HAL
open science

The Spectre of Abnormality: Deaf Education and the Poetics of Contestation at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

Sabine Arnaud

► **To cite this version:**

Sabine Arnaud. The Spectre of Abnormality: Deaf Education and the Poetics of Contestation at the Turn of the Twentieth Century. *History Workshop Journal*, 2021, 92, pp.106-129. 10.1093/hwj/dbaa031 . hal-03087265

HAL Id: hal-03087265

<https://hal.science/hal-03087265>

Submitted on 5 Jan 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Spectre of Abnormality: Deaf Education and the Poetics of Contestation at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

by Sabine Arnaud

In France, we confuse assimilation and uniformity. We still uphold the old Platonic idea of universals. We want to model everyone in our own image, as if we had attained absolute perfection, and as if all Frenchmen were alike.

Yves Guyot, 1885¹

In 1885 the French Republican journalist Yves Guyot published a series of letters in which he attacked the Third Republic's colonialism and criticized the desire to spread Republican ideals, the claims of a French race, and the superiority of French tradition. Politicians and administrators commonly used terms like assimilation, uniformity, universality, and equality to promote a concerted project based on hierarchy that claimed to usher in social progress, and demanded in return conformity and a sense of belonging, regardless of whether the people concerned were from the colonies, French rural areas, or the so-called 'remote' provinces, such as Brittany.²

Guyot's powerful words also serve to describe the motives that guided the contemporary development of the human sciences, especially in education, therapeutic hygiene, experimental psychology, and psychiatry. As John Carson has shown in *The Measure of Merit*, the implications involved at the time included guaranteeing social order – which meant the legitimization of class – and determining what was to be expected from citizens.³ Ways to justify social inequality were needed, defining what social order relied upon, and how and to what degree social mobility could transform society and its values. In broader terms, while advocating equality as a goal, the emergence of human sciences served the rationalization of social disparity, and the construction of various rationales and narratives to explain, validate, and even support it.

That French be made the universal language in France was one of the decisive demands of the era. Advocated earlier by French revolutionaries such as Abbé Grégoire (1750–1831) but then forgotten, in the 1880s the call assumed new urgency, for political, social, and intellectual reasons.⁴ After 1833, when the Loi Guizot established free education for boys at parish level,⁵ schools and the rates of attendance increased considerably even in the countryside, despite irregularities due to seasonal work in the fields. But the majority of the rural French population communicated in dialects, and the schools, as much as the Church, relied on such dialects to spread knowledge. ⁶ Deaf people⁷ were typically taught sign language and communicated in signs more than in writing; they were not alone in finding access to the national language difficult and uncertain, and the term 'savage' might be applied alike to deaf people, colonized people, or French peasants.⁸ This was to change, as the requirement to master French became a state concern. When school attendance was made obligatory in 1882, hearing people became increasingly

bilingual, using dialect at home and learning French in school. Deaf people by contrast faced a radically new requirement: to learn speech.⁹

France was not the only country to impose speech on deaf people in the late nineteenth century. At the International Congress on the Education of the Deaf held in Milan in 1880, administrators and teachers from institutions for deaf education in Europe largely agreed to support the teaching of speech, which they insisted was the only real form of communication. Some teachers even claimed that only lack of expertise had stopped them from teaching speech before then (as if they had acquired some in the meantime). This led to or ratified changes throughout the Western world in the methods used in schools for deaf children.¹⁰ Speech was now being adopted following new developments in physiology and the renewed commitment of teachers. It was in France that this change to orality was the most abrupt. The teaching of sign language had been privileged from the start in France – so much so that the teaching of signs was considered the ‘French method’, in contrast to the ‘German method’, which referred to the teaching of speech. In the late eighteenth century, the fame of Abbé de l’Epée, considered by many as the first teacher of deaf people, had led to the creation of a deaf school in the United States under the supervision of French deaf teacher Laurent Clerc. Methodical signs were taught, and French sign language dictionaries published throughout the nineteenth century – two of which were translated into Spanish and Brazilian – instilled the idea that French deaf education relied on signs and that the teaching of signs was a French legacy.¹¹ In France, unlike in Germany, Belgium, Britain and Italy, the polemics of conflicting pedagogical methods only rarely led to adoption of the teaching of speech as a priority in the classroom.¹² Speech was seen as a supplementary skill, to be taught only once the students had mastered written French.

The Milan Congress could not alone have transformed the French pedagogical landscape (any more than it could effect instant change in the United States). In France the promotion of speech fitted well with the existing political agenda of unification and linguistic uniformity. A couple of months after radical republican Jules Ferry, President of the Council of Ministers, had delivered his inaugural address, ‘French, the Language of the Republic’, before the Council of Public Instruction,¹³ the French Ministry of the Interior could not but seize that opportunity for the Congress to invite deaf people to join a national trend by relinquishing a sign language that no one identified as being French. Additionally, this new request came in the wake of politicians’ claims that teachers were merely adopting a conservative approach instead of adapting their methods in order to meet societal demands.¹⁴ Although the Congress lacked the legal authority to change a country’s educational priorities, the Ministry of the Interior had enforced it by placing pressure on teachers of deaf pupils – an easy task, given that most of the bursaries were departmentally, regionally, and nationally funded.

Far from being mere spectators of the change, deaf people immediately rallied, launched journals and demanded that teachers defend an education they saw as appropriate to their needs. Deaf writers developed a radical analysis of the repercussions of the newly implemented pedagogical methods, opposing the lack of capacity ascribed to them with irony, sarcasm, and critical analysis. Access to their

writings is challenging, as most of the journals they created were short-lived and not stored in national libraries. They remain absent from databases, reinforcing their exclusion from knowledge transmission. As we shall see, these writings ventured beyond the mere expression of anger or the adoption of a victim status. Instead they questioned the power and impact of education in the development of the human condition and the capacity to live in society, as well as the ways in which access to citizenship was being manipulated. Their challenge led to what some would describe as one of the first empowerment movements in disability history.¹⁵

While much work in recent decades has addressed education, discipline, normality,¹⁶ and the rewriting of history from the perspective of minority groups and disability,¹⁷ traces of how emancipation developed are still largely ignored.¹⁸ As Jacques Rancière has aptly noted, Foucault focused on the question of power, and did not choose to consider the question of political subjectivation. Rancière developed such an inquiry in relation to typographers' publications in nineteenth-century Lyon.¹⁹ He did not limit his analysis of their texts to the emergence of a political identity, but identified a poetical dimension in the emancipation they generated. This article is inspired by Rancière's method, which treated typographers' texts 'not as documents that would express or conceal the condition of real workers and the forms of their experienced domination, but as the sheer reality of the polemical configuration of workers as a subject'.²⁰ What this article purposes to consider is the means by which deaf individuals' were empowered by their experience of writing and publishing. Such activities allowed them to achieve a new identity and sense of belonging, while defining their polemical relationship to their citizenship and developing their political being. For my title phrase 'poetics of contestation', I rely on Rancière's words:

Poetics of knowledge infers that there is a narrative construction of knowledge and a discourse that wonders about this construction. With 'aesthetics', instead, I mean aesthesis: a way of being affected by an object, an act, a representation, a way of inhabiting the world."²¹

By surpassing any expectations concerning their skills, and shaping a poetic throughout their writings, deaf people paved the way for forms of subjectivation to emerge across the political consciousness of their educational needs and rights.

In this article, the history of deaf people exemplifies both the Third Republic's commitment to uniformity and assimilation, and the emancipation of individuals alleged to be incapable of independent thought or action. Focusing on the stakes and impact of the Milan Congress, I investigate both the projections that produced such a shift in the characterization of deaf people, and how deaf people themselves discussed the newly adopted methods and shaped their own expectations. After retracing the scope of the French Republican project to promote speech, this article will examine deaf people's responses and the invention of new categories – especially 'backward' and 'abnormal' – to classify children in relation to the educational project. It will consider how these years of struggle were also years of emancipation, insofar as the acquisition of language became a poetical and political act of subjects taking a stance for themselves as well as their peers.²²

* * *

Just one year after the Milan Congress, the National Congress for the Amelioration of the Lot of Deaf-Mute People, held in Paris in 1881 under the patronage of the Ministry of the Interior, undertook to frame the move to oralism with a wide national scope. For Jean Henri Antoine Doniol, prefect of Gironde and president of the organizational committee of the Congress, the teaching of speech was from that point on an acquired right that any civilized nation owed its citizens. Commenting upon a prior congress held in 1878 as part of the Universal Exhibition in Paris, in which the teaching of speech had been advocated, he said: ‘I cannot help remarking here that it was something really worthy of the French Republic – this declaration of a scientific maxim which seemed to constitute another article in the Declaration of Human Rights and the Rights of Citizens, for the benefit of human creatures still considered, so to speak, outside humanity’.²³ Although deaf men along with all male citizens had been given the right to vote in 1848 under the Second Republic, Doniol’s remark suggests that they were still considered outcasts. In his view, only the acquisition of speech could make deaf people fully fledged citizens and men.

Far from being a priority from the outset, the teaching of speech had been neglected throughout most of the nineteenth century in favour of sign language. From the French Revolution on, the term ‘deaf-mute’ had been used with regularity as a social category that included all those entitled to an education in the name of what was then seen as an infirmity: deafness.²⁴

Fig. 1. A. Jacobus Burger, ‘Visit of President Faure to the Institut National des Jeunes Sourds’, 1897. Faure (with red sash) attends a demonstration class. The French flags, the open window, and the world globe symbolize the ambitions of the French Republic. Oralist teaching of speech is being demonstrated, yet pupils are using sign language in the background.
[Credit] VC Institut National des Jeunes Sourds.

At the time, and throughout the nineteenth century, medical intervention existed; the deaf population were seen not as a population of patients, but as people in need of education to provide them with language.²⁵ With the death in 1789 of Abbé de l’Epée the National Constituent Assembly had committed the government to provide education for deaf people – a pledge which the National Convention later extended to the creation of six national institutes in the form of boarding schools, with bursaries for pupils in need.²⁶ It was considered an act of benevolence under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior. Even though only two institutes were ultimately created, in legal terms, ‘deaf-mute children and blind children’ were the first in French history to be theoretically guaranteed an education. The choice of educational methods was left up to the professors. This commitment was part of a higher purpose: to make up for inequalities produced by nature, in faithfulness to the ideals of the French Revolution.

The influence of Abbé de l’Epée’s school and publications up to his death was such that even though the state did not specify one type of teaching to be employed in its institutes, it was understood that it would be based on the methodical system of signs which de l’Epée had promoted, and would privilege written French. For the most part, fingerspelling and speech would be set aside. While new methods abounded throughout the nineteenth century, most teachers developed them around the creation of sign language – potentially including the teaching of speech as a later component

Arnaud, Sabine. 2021. “The Spectre of Abnormality: Deaf Education and the Poetics of Contestation at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *History Workshop Journal* 92, 1-24, doi: 10.1093/hwj/dbaa031.

of the instruction. Setting up a new destiny for deaf people and for the French Republic almost a century later, Doniol presented articulation as key for progress toward equality. The state's responsibility involved giving its citizens the means to communicate, but with a single model: all must first and foremost acquire speech. If the arbitrariness of nature excluded deaf people from spoken intercourse, the role of government officials was to correct what they saw as natural inequalities.

This concern echoed Jules Ferry's 1870 'Discourse on Equality of Education', which regarded equality as social progress and as the 'very essence and legitimacy of French society'.²⁷ For Ferry, then mayor of Paris and by 1879 minister of public instruction and the arts, 'Human society has only one goal, only one law of development, one highest aim: to attenuate, more and more, through the ages, the primitive inequalities bestowed by nature'.²⁸ As Anne Quartararo has noted, 'government ministers became more and more conscious of order and unity. Ferry . . . was one of these leaders who feared a divided nation and devoted much of his energy in the 1880s to forging a national identity for France'.²⁹ According to Ferry's speech, while the French Revolution had eradicated class inequality and inequality of property, the most terrible inequality remained: that of education, which meant real equality of rights was not being achieved.³⁰ Like Ferry's, Doniol's call was made within the scope of revolutionary discourse; with this additional demand for articulation, the Third Republic announced its desire to pursue, moreover to realize, the true ambitions of the French Republic.

In practice, the teaching of so-called 'pure speech' was based on 'articulation', the aim of which was to instruct deaf children without resorting to sign language, fingerspelling, mime, or even writing. Pupils who had already begun their education with sign language continued with it (so the previous method stayed in use until 1886); but all new generations were to be taught articulation exercises exclusively, right from the start. Beginning in 1880, regional, national, religious, and private schools for deaf children dedicated the first three to four years of instruction to teaching pronunciation, focusing on the articulation of vowels, consonants, syllables, and then words. (Fig. 2) Children were to be shown the written version of what they were required to pronounce only when they had said it correctly. They had to mimic the inflection of respiration and the position of lips and tongue, regularly corrected by the intrusion into their mouths of a spatula or even the teacher's fingers. This postponed to a very late age the acquisition of any language, since deaf children were only enrolled in school between eight and twelve years of age, for seven to eight years of instruction.³¹

Fig. 2. Teacher instructs pupil on how to articulate the sound of 'e'. From Ludovic Goguillot, *Enseignement de la parole aux sourds-muets*, Paris, 1885, Fig. 32, p. 193. This was based on a lecture given in Limoges that year to mark the opening of a municipal day-school for deaf children.

Meanwhile, in 1882, Jules Ferry passed a law which made education free and obligatory for all, and which promoted a unique teaching model exemplified by the creation of *écoles normales départementales* (training schools for teachers in each *département*). Education of 'deaf-mute' and blind children was to be subject to special dispositions to be added later – but they never were. Beyond the eagerness to unify the French people with a single spoken language, the goal was to promote social

progress for the benefit of all social classes. In the meantime, deaf pupils were to attend school, even if no specific specific teaching was available. In the words of John Carson:

‘Many educational commentators believed the 1882 law mandating universal primary instruction brought the ‘problem’ of the anormaux (abnormal) to a head, because it guaranteed them an inappropriate education and forced into the classroom children who might previously have been kept at home, or allowed to perform simple manual labour’ .32

Ferry also secularized elementary teaching, ordering clerical teachers to be replaced by lay teachers in public schools, which led to the passage of laws to that effect in 1901 and 1905.³³ However, while appropriate dispositions had been taken ahead of time with the development of departmental *écoles normales* (training schools for teachers), no such planning had been done for deaf education. Secular teachers eager and ready to undertake the task were in short supply, so teaching for deaf pupils was slow to change, being still performed for the most part by clerics, or by previous clergy members who had quit their order to conform to the law. While the preference for speech in Italy may be linked to the prevalence of the Church in deaf education and the belief in the vocal nature of the Gospel,³⁴ the same assumption cannot be made in France. Manuscripts held in Angers exemplify that one teaching congregation there, the *Charité Sainte-Marie*, made a different choice. Not only did the mother

superior defend the teaching of signs in her correspondence with the prefect who allotted bursaries for her school, but letters from alumni thanked the sisters for learning signs from deaf pupils in order to communicate with them, which demonstrates the convent’s independence from the state requirements. These deaf pupils wrote of their hope that the nuns would be able to retain their teaching functions, threatened under the recent law.³⁵

* * *

In the ensuing years, what mattered nationally was that deaf pupils should learn to articulate and lip-read, with the assumption that once they could do so, they would no longer be deaf. For teachers and officials of the Ministry of Public Instruction and the Ministry of the Interior, deaf people were not so much individuals with auditory variation as people who had no access to speech. In their urgency, teachers then dismissed previous distinctions between deafness from birth and deafness resulting from illness. Needing to focus on ‘results’, they no longer gave much importance to either the origin of deafness or its degree. Inspired by the call for equality and the acquisition of speech, they focused exclusively on the future capacity of deaf people to speak. Ludovic Goguillot, a teacher at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris, went so far as to say, in 1885: ‘From now on, the word Deaf-mute can be crossed out of the vocabulary and replaced by the word Deaf-talking’.³⁶ (Figs 2 and 3) Teachers accepted the move to oralism with varying degrees of goodwill. The Ministry of the Interior specified for the first time what results were to be obtained and exerted further pressure by comparison with results achieved in other European countries. The difficulties involved did not at first hinder the teachers, as they attributed the challenges to the newness of the shift to the teaching of speech. Results still had to be compared to other countries and methods unified throughout France. In

1889, Gabriel Rancurel, a teacher at the National Institute, took it upon himself to explain why the promises of 1880 could not be kept in an article titled ‘Yesterday and Today: Why Deaf-Mute People Do Not Speak Better’.³⁷ Moving away from the smug rhetoric of previous years, he referred to the contemporary belief in miracles happening in the southern town of Lourdes, to which people undertook trips in the hope of curing their ills or bettering their conditions; he wrote: ‘Our schools are sometimes provided with swimming-pools, but they do not have miraculous powers’. He admitted that deaf pupils ‘would never improve their French, since they have never heard it and are not forced to employ it outside of the hours in class’.³⁸ In his opinion, teachers of deaf pupils needed faith more than science. He insisted that no lack of expertise was to be blamed, and that repetition, not laryngology, was the most essential tool. Ongoing competition with the medical field in the care of deaf people induced him to add that physicians would do no better. He accused them of speaking merely from a position of authority and leaving it to teachers, whom he called ‘speech workers’,³⁹ to do all the hard work.

From the mid 1880s discussion developed in deaf journals such as the *Revue française de l’éducation des sourds-muets* (1885–92), published by the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes and edited by A. Be’langer,⁴⁰ and the *Revue générale de l’enseignement des sourds-muets* (1899–1967), published by the teaching body of the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes. Articles they printed implied that signs were still used in the classroom even though they might not be formally taught as before, and that teachers no longer desired to abandon them entirely. The rhetoric of government officials, however, continued to endow speech with the power of transforming the pupils. For example, Gabriel Leroux, Prefect of the Orne department, in Normandy, accepted the myths in which, it seems, they all wanted to believe. At the annual prize day of the school in Ve’soul, speaking of deaf pupils as prisoners of nature, he declared:

The day that deaf-mute children can formulate a sound, they are saved. Their intelligence develops at the same time as their voice. These two educations move alongside one another, they have an interdependent relationship. The creation of the voice must therefore be the first goal of education. For is this not indeed a true education, this work of the human being, fighting against this elusive quality that constitutes the incapacity to express oneself; holding the child close as it exerts itself to kindle the first glimmers of intelligence?⁴¹

Many teachers were themselves caught up in visions of politicians that they did not dare to question. Despite the difficulties, over the years professor, Benoît Thollon, General Supervisor of Studies at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, maintained his focus on speech, asserting in 1907:

It is undoubtedly useful to familiarize children with elements of arithmetic, geography, the history of morals, civic instruction; but how much more urgent still it is to attenuate their infirmity as much as possible, by placing them in a position to communicate orally with their fellow creatures! Their teacher is therefore mainly a teacher of spoken language.⁴²

* * *

In this perspective, deaf people could only be seen as having started late and been set back by the learning of articulation. On this basis, at the turn of the century teachers would call them ‘backward’ (arriéré). As hygienist Armand Laurent explained in a talk at the Society of Practical Hygiene in Normandy: I have preferred the term backward, which it seems to me does not prejudge anything, while explicitly saying: ‘lateness in the manifestation of mental faculties compared to those observed in children of the same age, representing the average development of their faculties’.⁴³ The term was presented as positive insofar as it projected a temporal dimension onto what was viewed as a physiological inferiority, likely to be overcome in the near future. It was adopted throughout the fields of pedagogy, therapeutic hygiene, and experimental psychology.⁴⁴

Yet it was precisely in making speech a ‘right’ for all that the French Republic condemned deaf people to exclusion. Those who did not master speech despite their education were categorized as ‘backward’, ‘idiots’, ‘people without value’ (non-valeurs), not even capable of understanding the efforts being made on their behalf. The reversal had occurred almost unnoticed, in the enthusiasm for the new teaching method. At the previously mentioned 1881 Paris Congress most teachers, excited by a new commitment, had overlooked the divide they were creating:

The Congress, in considering the most experienced teachers’ testimonies that the purely oral method does not require any special intellectual dispositions, believed that all deaf-mute children not affected by idiocy, and therefore able to receive an ordinary education, must be raised and instructed in the purely oral method, as long as they are granted a prolonged period of study, and are subjected to a programme in proportion to their faculties.⁴⁵

Abbe’ Goyatton’s was the only voice raised to invoke the risks of this educative approach. After having thanked the delegate of the Ministry of Public Instruction (Félix Hément), and paid tribute to the nuns already undertaking speech education, he expressed ‘surprise that Mr Hément sees in speech the criterion of the degree of intelligence of the child . . .’. According to the report, ‘Mr. Hément responded that he had simply meant that the idiot did not speak and would never speak, while the deaf-mute child would one day be able to talk’.⁴⁶ A ‘pedagogic fiction’⁴⁷ had already begun to guide the approach to pupils, according to which speech mastery signified the possibility of reaching maturity, with slow and possibly limited access for deaf people. As such, from 1880, a child’s predisposition for learning speech became a new criterion of selection in the name of new pedagogical expertise.

* * *

While most teachers congratulated themselves on their tenacity in sticking to the new teaching challenge, deaf writers, on the contrary, warned of the effects that for the new generation of pupils. According to them, the acquisition of sign language was a necessary step before learning speech. By starting with the teaching of speech, teachers denied the very specific needs of deaf pupils to become linguistic beings. Sign language instruction invited pupils to create signs and taught them patterns for

creating and standardizing them. The conditions governing the teaching of speech, on the other hand, produced a total loss of autonomy, as deaf people were not able to evaluate the sounds they pronounced on their own. Oralist teachers (those determined to focus on speech) and government members dismissed the controversy, with the result that deaf and hearing people stopped publishing in the same journals. A poetics of contestation arose in marginal spaces, with petitions, congresses, and journals edited by deaf people who at times chose to call themselves the ‘silent people’. Again and again they published narratives of their views. Despite the difficulty of financing such journals, a host of them appeared in the following thirty years, and, when short-lived, they were immediately replaced by others, attesting to the vitality of initiatives. Adopting, in turn, irony, satire, and critical analysis, writers Lucien Limosin, Eugene Née, and Henri Gaillard were the most active of their generation, questioning ideas that hearing teachers took to be obvious. Writing became a place from which to position their demands and experience emancipation.

As early as in 1884, Joseph Turcan, corresponding member of the Société d’Appui Fraternel (Society of Brotherly Support) created the monthly journal *La Défense des sourds-muets* (Defence of the Deaf-Mute), and made Limosin editor in chief.

Limosin published satirical articles opposing poetics of knowledge to political order: he contrasted hygiene to scientific authority and irony to rationality, and set his own bodily experience over professorial legitimacy. Readers of his writings understood that for teachers, deaf students did not exist as such, but only in comparison to the hearing pupils whose capacities and activities they were to emulate. Only educational results were evaluated, and along with them, the human qualities and abilities of deaf people defined. Limosin provoked a critique of the fiction that the world was divided into savants and ignoramuses, a vision nurtured by people whose expectations were based on their utter ignorance of deaf people’s experiences and abilities.

Limosin predicted not only the failure of the new educational model, but the real backwardness it would produce, since it did not equip deaf people with the tools necessary for their intellectual development. Contrary to the denial practiced by his peers, Limosin claimed literary authority when he wrote ‘I have a grin on my face, but I’m not laughing’.⁴⁸ He was referring to Victor Hugo’s 1869 novel *L’homme qui rit* (The Man Who Laughs), whose hero, mutilated as a child so that his face bore a permanent grin, became a performing freak. ‘It is, unfortunately, all too true’, Limosin went on to say, adding: ‘Deaf-mute people are condemned, just like the man who laughs, to speak . . . in the manner of parrots and of idiotic hearing-speaking people’.⁴⁹ Like the Hugo character forced to laugh regardless of what he heard or thought, deaf people, according to Limosin, were constrained to utter sounds that had no meaning for them and no connection to what they wished to express.

Opting for violent images in several of his articles, Limosin described the future of deaf people, predicting that they would:

. . . end up sinking into hideous ignorance, which will give their physiognomy an alarming expression of trepidation, stupor, idiotism, in a word, of bestial life; for, when they have to express themselves vocally, they will spend several minutes in hesitation, groping, efforts, contortions, and stuttering before they can make themselves understood.⁵⁰

‘Far from being a method of light and education, articulation’, he concluded, ‘this method of violence, oppression, obscurity, poisoning, and finally charlatanism – only turns poor little Deaf children into idiots’.⁵¹ Again and again, Limosin recounts scenes of deaf people being ridiculed when their teachers, to show off the wonders of deaf pupils speaking, have them utter words and responses to sentences with no regard to whether they understood anything. The quest for pronunciation may have blinded the teachers, but the public immediately saw that the pupils did not know what they were saying. These dramatic scenes led the public to believe that the pupils were devoid of any capacity to understand, when all they lacked was proper instruction. So the insistence on speech communication not only deprived deaf pupils of linguistic experience, it also turned hearing people away from them: they were declared too difficult to reach.

Limosin’s articles dealt with the exclusion of deaf teachers from the institutes, the rejection of sign language, losses in education, absence of alternatives, dispossession from knowledge, delegitimation of deaf testimony, and the inability of deaf people to access mainstream culture and legal rights. His vivid accounts showed how the teaching of speech disempowered deaf people instead of training them, and how it cast deaf people as the problem. He hammers home the impact of pedagogy, lists of consequences accelerating the rhythm of his sentences. Descriptions are amplified by rhetoric – the new so-called experts are vultures, while deaf people become parrots, and their lives are those of beasts. Rejecting ‘expert’ aspersions on deaf people’s intelligence he instead insisted on the pedagogic origin of their limited abilities.

Rhetorical figures, from accumulation, to anaphora, gradation, hyperbole, and antithesis, aimed to move readers, as they pictured the scenes he describes. The visual dimensions and the rhythmical force of the text might win over readers emotionally, while the critical analysis aimed to convince them on rational grounds. In an article he called ‘The Tower of Babel of Deaf-Mutes’, Limosin reversed the scale of values, writing: ‘Insane are the people who declare all Deaf-mute people unable to pronounce a single word to be idiotic so cold-bloodedly – even while they proclaim so loudly the intelligence of Deaf-mute people able to pronounce words of whose meanings they are completely ignorant!’⁵² With unflinching sharpness, Limosin foreshadowed the assimilation of deaf children to so-called ‘idiots’ that was to occur in subsequent years.

* * *

In fact, the language used to talk about deafness was changing, increasingly equating it with imbecility, idiocy, backwardness, and – from the 1890s – abnormality, which, in the name of distinguishing a sensory difference, was soon equated with mental difference. The development of expertise in psychology, psychiatry, therapeutic hygiene, and criminology, which embraced deafness as a favourite terrain of expertise, provided new frameworks to interpret any delay in expected scholarly results.⁵³ If these competencies have now developed to the point of being differentiated into individual disciplines, at the time they were embedded within pedagogic and medical fields so extensively that teachers commonly borrowed from laryngology and therapeutic hygiene, while doctors articulated pedagogical practices or tests. Much

more than an auditory variation, deafness was conceptualized as a condition that affected the development of individuals, setting them apart from their fellow citizens. Toward the turn of the century, as the government set itself the task of uniting all of its citizens, the strategies implemented accentuated this divide to the point of opposing ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ pupils.

Keeping track of all the publications on deafness, French deaf writers fought hard over the words used to talk about their condition, determined to master the language of deafness, since linguistic mastery provided entry to specific practices, expertise, and institutions. Eugène Née chose to attack the work of two physicians, Holger Mygind and Edoardo Giampietro,⁵⁴ whose theories – even if they were not translated into French – circulated via reviews in journals on deaf people. Here is the definition that Mygind provided in his main work:

Deaf-mutism, strictly speaking, signifies an abnormality, which is characterized by the co-existence of Deafness and dumbness. . . . Deaf-mutism may, therefore, be defined as a pathological condition dependent upon an anomaly of the auditory organs, either congenital or acquired in childhood. . . . Individuals exhibiting this pathological condition are described as Deaf-mutes, even when speech has been acquired by a special system of instruction.⁵⁵

Until the last decade of the nineteenth century, the term ‘abnormal’ was used only as an adjective. In the *Revue française de l’éducation des sourds-muets* writers would discuss, for example, the ‘abnormal functioning of the ear’,⁵⁶ in formulations that characterized an organ or a function. But here Mygind, like many of his contemporaries versed in experimental psychology, gave the term ‘abnormality’ a new twist, setting the deaf population apart from the norm. In fact, the term in its nominative form had already been used to refer to individuals. By citing Giampietro’s words: ‘All deaf-mute people are sick’, and Mygind’s: ‘Three-quarters of deaf-mute people populate the insane asylums’,⁵⁷ Née forced the reader to take sides. He rejected both classification of deafness as a pathology of the ear, and the labelling of deaf-mutism as an abnormality. To oppose such assertions he resorted to irony. ‘*Les Sourds-Muets et les anthropologistes*’ (Deaf-Mute People and the Anthropologists) was a diatribe against Mygind and Giampietro (whom he characterized as Mygind’s follower). Pretending to express admiration for their expertise, he commented:

In my capacity as a sick person, as a head case, I energetically petition the Ministry of the Interior to let me into any hospital whatsoever, where I may get fat and do nothing; in fact, in my capacity as a sick person, an incompetent, I refuse with vociferous energy to do any kind of work at all, and actually, being insane, I definitely would not be able to cope; it would just make me sweat for nothing.⁵⁸

He asks whether, in their desire ‘to push to the background of humanity a class of men, women, and children who simply cannot speak or perceive sounds, they have confused these two things with the term of understanding’.⁵⁹

Rather than positioning deaf people as powerless victims, Née denounced the

mystification that blinded politicians, doctors, and teachers who nourished the dream of a uniform population. He showed how they confused equality and conformity and how they created intellectual, moral, and social inequalities through their rejection of physiological differences and varied abilities. Against the physicians' purported expertise, he demonstrated the impact of their errors, their misleading statements, and the narrowness of their criteria.

* * *

Much criticism of the new educational venture was published by deaf writers over the years. Henri Gaillard was the most relentless in his deconstruction of the impact and politics of education, addressing it radically while making sure to maintain cooperation with hearing people involved with deaf people – even those dedicated to oralism. In fact, for him, speech was less the issue than the increasing use of a psychological term to categorize deaf people. As early as 1892, and for over twenty years, Gaillard challenged use of the term 'abnormal'. A former pupil at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris, he was also chief editor of a host of journals, including the *Revue des sourds-muets* and *L'Echo des sourds-muets*, for he was determined that deaf people should be employed during the First World War I, since the French government, despite their repeated requests, had refused to send them to fight. He was awarded the title of 'Officer of Instruction', usually reserved for teachers and university professors. He also worked as a proofreader at the national printing company, which earned him the Légion d'Honneur in 1928. He presented his views on deaf people and deaf education at congresses throughout Europe and the United States. In brochures, articles, and journals which Gaillard created, edited, or directed, he reviewed some of his contemporaries' most offensive publications, at times setting psychologists against teachers. His use and analysis of the term 'abnormal' changed, along with the use that psychologists made of it. When Gaillard first employed the term in two works from 1892, it was still seldom used. Seeing in it the potential to move away from a construction of deafness as a pathology and to think of it instead as a variation in the human condition, he wrote: 'People persist in considering deaf-mute people as infirm, and not as being part of an abnormal population, differentiated from the other population only by the privation of hearing; but having, just like the other one, its invalids and its non-invalids'.⁶⁰ Gaillard used the term just when it first surfaced in scientific publications in order to play a role in establishing its denotations and connotations. He positioned it as a piece of terminology to be used for quantitative reasons, and for a qualitative purpose. 'Abnormal' was used to characterize deaf people as a minority and to individuate this minority on the basis of a physiological difference: auditory variation. The idea was to abandon the term 'infirm' due to its stigmatizing effect, and to identify deafness as a difference, not an inequality, in equal abilities as humans and citizens. The abnormal person was marked by a distinctive character that enabled specific capacities, which would only be realized with an appropriate education.⁶¹

Soon a second meaning emerged, meant to denote part of the human species and to name a physiological variation that struck hearing and deaf people equally. Administrators and their followers now viewed those who succeeded in learning speech as 'normal' deaf people, and those who could only access education through sign language as 'abnormal' deaf people. Albert Regnard, the former president of

welfare institutions and services for the so-called insane, and member of the superior board for prisons and public assistance, was the most relentless in that regard. The physiological difference made up of an auditory variation was then assimilated to a gap defining an intellectual superiority and inferiority. The point was to shield those who were receptive to the teaching of speech from all those who would slow down its progress. In a presentation delivered at the International Congress of Deaf-Mute People in Saint Louis, Missouri, Gaillard returned to this distinction between two types of deaf people when he mentioned ‘backward’ deaf-mute children for whom ‘special institutions that had nothing to do with the schools for deaf-mute children [we]re necessary’.⁶² Strategically, it might have seemed sound to concede the existence of so-called ‘abnormal’ children among deaf children in order to redeem the others with a proper education, separate from all children categorized as backward. This was indeed what was emerging, as government officials slowly began thinking about educative structures for so-called ‘abnormal’ pupils, and included all deaf children in the category. Gaillard used this distinction in several of his publications while re-evaluating the term’s scope. A few years later, he argued:

Among [deaf] children with ordinary intelligence, I am sure there are twenty-five percent absolutely resistant to purely oral teaching. Assigning them to a school for backward children would be a deliberate decision to turn them into actual backward people. It would be a monstrosity. It is to be hoped that militant Deaf-mute people will not allow oralist purists to find criminal loopholes to the obvious powerlessness of their harmful methods.⁶³

For Gaillard, the number of deaf people diagnosed as abnormal was not to be equated with the number of those who could not learn to speak. The capacity to articulate was, for him, not subject to this division. Albert Regnard was particularly dedicated to dividing the population into normal and abnormal people, the latter category including all deaf people. The third page of his 1902 work stated that ‘everyone knows that deaf-mute people are inferior in all respects: only professionals of philanthropy have declared that they are like other people’.⁶⁴ He maintained that they were ‘similar to the homo alalus, to men without speech from prehistoric times, or even more backward since they do not hear; they move around their fellow creatures like shadows, without hearing them, without understanding them’.⁶⁵ Convinced that human thought was only possible via speech, he affirmed that deafness was a ‘special condition that produce[d] the diminution of intelligence in the born-deaf, all else being equal. It [wa]s the absence of this incomparable element in intellectual development: the formation of articulate language, the evolution of speech’.⁶⁶

Refusing to ascribe the failure of the educational system to anything but the physiological backwardness of deaf people (no longer a temporary backwardness) government officials and administrators equated the lack of results with the arbitrary laws of nature. Postulating equality as a Republican objective, and neglecting physiological diversity, at the turn of the twentieth century many of them negated the very equality they had been confident they would bring about just twenty years earlier. As for Gaillard, he kept watching for any mention of deaf people’s initiatives, quoting one work after the other in his attempts to highlight the manipulation of public opinion. At the Third Congress for Deaf-Mute People, held in Geneva in 1896, he

relayed the following announcement published about their gathering:

Congress of Mutes [sic]

This congress was announced amid a blaze of publicity among political journals avid for sensational news. There is no need to be offended or to worry, no more than a physician who happens to be criticized by a poor dropsical patient.⁶⁷

Gaillard explained:

This is why they are indignant about our will to be ourselves, this is why they try any means to humiliate us, degrade us, and ridicule us. They know very well that we are a people apart, who, already morally and intellectually emancipated, now have the pretension to materially emancipate ourselves.⁶⁸

In his quest for emancipation, Gaillard forsook the necessity of writing from the position of a deaf writer in his journals. From October 1899, this mention disappears, and the reader is no longer given any indication of whether or not the writer is deaf. This appears to be a political statement in favour of equality, publishing anyone without distinguishing who is deaf and who is not, and considering all opinions regardless of physiological origin. From then on, Gaillard began to consider causes other than those exclusively regarding deaf people and to embrace wider social, moral, and political movements. For example, in the journal he founded in 1899, *La République de demain*, he published articles supporting Dreyfus and attacking anti-Semitism.⁶⁹ Married to Louise-Henriette Walser, who also wrote novels and articles, he was very active in the cause of women. Up to date on international politics, he opposed colonialism and the British invasion of South Africa. He also embraced animal-related causes, notably attacking bullfighting in his articles.

* * *

When French revolutionaries committed themselves to setting up national institutes for deaf children in order to turn them into citizens, they extended their concept of exercising citizenship to the use of sign language. Almost a century later, when the politicians of the Third Republic strove to renew commitment to its deaf citizens, they did so by insisting that deaf people adapt themselves to the customary forms of communication, declaring that only speech could grant access to knowledge. They not only demanded that deaf people know French, but devised the ways that French was to be taught and mastered. In the meantime, the transition to a generalized educational model had weakened the status of deaf children, who were from then on evaluated according to a unique model. For the politicians of the Third Republic, the point of education was to homogenize the level at which all children could access equal opportunities, erasing differences despite potential physiological variations.

For deaf writers, on the other hand, education meant first and foremost the possibility of becoming full citizens aware of their rights and duties, able to participate in the epistemological, political, social, and economic shaping of society, and to continue down the road toward emancipation. Far from merely opposing the teaching of speech, Limosin, Née, and Gaillard rejected a single educational format that mistook the standardization of pupils for the equality of their chances. What they advocated

instead was a world in which difference was not only allowed, but on an educational level promoted, in order to give everyone the best possible chances of realizing their potential. Because the official educational model, while purporting to give all pupils an equal start, actually endangered the start of deaf pupils by postponing their education to an uncertain date, these deaf activists advocated a model that would adapt to every pupil's starting conditions, using different methods to accommodate each of their specific needs. They thereby called into question not only the goals of education, but its methods, indicating the limits of the uniformity that had become the prevalent argument among teachers.

Their writings demonstrate that deaf people were actually the ones taking full advantage of the critical dimension of language. Deaf people who could sign were fully equal in writing. While articulating their demands for justice and intellectual challenge, they shared their love of rhetorical expression and creatively analysed their own positions. Refusing to remain in the place to which society had reduced them, they turned writing into a space of emancipation. At a time when politicians believed they could easily solve the issue of equality in education issue, deaf writers showed what a complex task it really was, and exposed the risks involved in holding to standardized expectations instead of starting from the challenge offered by the rich diversity of human variation. These authors opened up new ways of thinking about how established expertise has dictated the development of individuals rather than acknowledging their potential.