Silence as resistance to analysis. Or, on not opening one’s mouth properly

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If silence is golden, there will have been something deadly about its glitter.
[Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny]

Her friend would have been wiser, that is to say she would have yielded sooner. She would then have opened her mouth properly, and have told me more than Irma.
[Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams]

Abstract
The article engages with the problematic nature of silence and its tendency to trouble qualitative inquiry. Silence is frequently read as resistance – as an impediment to analysis or the emergence of an authentic voice. Rather than seeking methodological remedies for such impediments, the article dwells on, and in, the recalcitrance of silence. We read silence, via Derrida and Freud, as the trace of something Other at the heart of utterance – something intractable, unspeakable, unreasonable, unanalysable. Silence confounds interpretation and manifests, intolerably, the illusory status of speech as full ‘presence’ or living voice. Yet it also incites the search for meaning and is therefore productive. How might Method work with the alterity of silence, rather than seeking to cure or compensate for its necessary insufficiencies? The paper is organised around three examples, or parables of silence. Humour gets tangled up in the text later on.

Introduction
Silence is often problematic, and not only within research encounters. We consider three parables about silence and its productively troublesome aspect.¹

1. Hannah
Hannah never responds when the teacher calls out her name during the morning ritual of ‘taking the register’. All the other 5-year olds in her class intone ‘Good Morning Mrs Edison’ in that familiar sing-song voice when hailed, in alphabetical order. But Hannah remains silent. This has become a problem. Which means Hannah has become a problem.² Her teacher cannot stand this breach of etiquette, this hole in the ceremonial order of the classroom. Taking the register has become a battleground. But despite the teacher’s entreaties, Hannah remains silent. Her mother is called in to discuss the problem, but she is unable to persuade Hannah to speak. Hannah’s father comes in and sits beside her on the carpet during register, responding when his name is called. But Hannah remains silent. Her parents begin to get upset. Though Hannah seems fine about talking in other contexts, they are worried about her being ‘different’ from the other children. And the other children have become involved. When Hannah’s name is called out they shout, Go on Hannah! Try! Hannah remains silent. One time, the teacher experiments with calling out the children’s names in reverse order (Hannah’s name comes early in the alphabet), but that just postpones her ordeal. Another time she lets the children answer in funny voices. This is hilarious for the other children, but visibly torture for Hannah. Finally the matter is discussed collectively amongst the staff. It is decided that the best thing is for the teacher to drop it, to stop pressing Hannah for a response. Mrs Edison is
unhappy, but reluctantly agrees. Meanwhile, however, Hannah’s mother has become really worried. She draws up a kind of behavioural chart, and asks Hannah’s teacher to let her know when Hannah does respond, so that she can get a little sticker rewarding her good behaviour.

There is something excessive about Hannah’s silence (if indeed it is her silence) and the reactions it provokes. Yet it amounts to such a little hole in the fabric of the daily routine – a mere four words. And their absence hardly leaves Mrs Edison in any doubt as to whether Hannah is actually ‘there’, which is the ostensible purpose of registration. Hannah is emphatically ‘there’ in her mute presence; she ‘registers’ on everyone’s horizon as soon as the routine begins. But the silence seems to make those around her almost frantic in their demand for her to speak, or for explanations as to why she does not. It produces fear, perplexity, anxiety, excitement, blame. It prompts diagnoses, for there must be something wrong with Hannah: she must be timid, or recalcitrant, or attention-seeking, or abnormal. It leads to actions and outcomes: changed classroom routines, parental visits, staffroom meetings, charts and stickers.

And of course Hannah’s silence eventually prompted analysis by researchers. We too started looking for explanations. In the project meeting where Hannah’s silence surfaced, questions proliferated. What did Hannah’s silence ‘mean’? Was the resistance intentional or not? Was she able to reply, but choosing not to? Or had she somehow become paralysed? Why had Mrs Edison been unable to drop the matter, turning into a kind of Nurse Ratched in her desire to make Hannah comply? We felt there was something traumatic about the whole event: that Mrs Edison might always feel that she had been defeated by a 5 year old; that Hannah might be marked by the experience too. Hannah’s silence seemed to carry some kind of meaning beyond ‘itself’. It felt, as we said at the time, like a parable or a metaphor. And so it has turned out to be.

There was, and is, something perplexing about Hannah’s silence. At one and the same time, it seems to mark a point of utter resistance (to meaning, communication, co-operation and classroom order), and a site of proliferation (of speech, actions, emotions, interpretations, consequences). It is simultaneously a knot and a dehiscent gap - an impasse and an open(ed) wound. The blockage that it causes in the rhythmic call-and-response of registration seems paradoxically to unleash troubling stuff: glimpses of a disciplinary violence regulating adults’ interactions with children, perhaps; or something intolerable in the vulnerability of children; or the fragility of the compact on which classroom order, and perhaps even social order, rests.

The inability either to terminate or to ‘make sense’ of Hannah’s silence also seems to carry consequences for the self-certainty of the onlooker/analyst. Denied the solace of closure, Hannah’s interlocutors and analysts start to unravel a little.

We want to suggest that Hannah’s silence dramatises some issues and dilemmas that both haunt and animate qualitative inquiry, and that these are connected with the threat of silence and the necessary failure of analysis. For Hannah’s silence above all resists analysis. We are unable to make sense of it. Yet we desperately want to. The silence both blocks and produces analysis.

2. Bartleby

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.
[Herman Melville, Bartleby, the Scrivener]
The problematic of Hannah’s silence is identical to that of Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, which Derrida (1998) invokes as a parable in his analysis of the resistance to analysis. The legal scribe Bartleby says neither yes nor no to the requests of his employer (who is also the narrator), always responding with ‘I would prefer not to’. Bartleby’s passivity certainly makes others speak and act however, especially the narrator (‘a tireless analyst’, says Derrida, 24). And as in Hannah’s case, it provokes waves of perplexity, concern, guilt and anger, rippling outwards from the embattled lawyer/narrator to implicate landlords, neighbours, police and prison inmates. Derrida notes moreover that ‘Bartleby makes the analyst speak as narrator and *man of the law*’ (24, italics added). The formless anxiety stirred up by unsanctioned silence is likely to call down the force of the law (which in Hannah’s case would include teachers and parents), or to call attention to its covert operation in the regulation of human affairs.

Bartleby’s resistance has the character of the navel of a dream, writes Derrida, taking off from Freud. The navel is the densely knotted umbilicus in the dream’s ‘meshwork’ - the point at which the dream-wish issues from the unknown, yet which blocks further interpretation (Freud, quoted in Derrida, 1998: 14). Derrida argues that this aporetic structure, where desire demands the analysis it prohibits, is characteristic of all analysis. Playing, orthographically, with the *restance* (remainder) that dwells in *resistance*, Derrida states that in every act of analysis there is always some *remains*; some excess that ‘remains’ resolutely unanalysable (1998: 30). Nothing can ever be completely, finally, analysed (analysed ‘to death’, says Derrida, and death haunts his analysis of analysis). This is because of two contradictory moments in analysis, visible in its etymology - one which seeks to return to origins, births and causes (*ana-*), and the other working relentlessly to break down, untie, solve, dissolve, resolve (*-lysis*). Analysis is thus endlessly divided by two incommensurable motifs, the ‘eschatological’ and the ‘archaeological’, ‘as if analysis were the bearer of extreme death and the last word… [yet also] turned toward birth’ (20). Pulled or paralysed between birth and death, intact origin and final (dis)solution, analysis is regulated by the structure, or the stricture (Derrida’s preferred word here) of the double bind. Pull on one thread and you tighten the other. Yet the ‘ordeal of aporia’ installed by the double bind is, Derrida argues, the very condition of analysis, and indeed of anything happening at all. It is that ‘endless and bottomless divisibility’, that resistant residue, that energises the search for origins or solutions by indefinitely postponing them. Without it, no event, responsibility or decision would take place. ‘Not even analysis’, writes Derrida. ‘Not even the place’ (37).

3. *Just* (Radiohead)
Bartleby, like Hannah (so far) never does speak up. He never does ‘open his mouth properly’ and ‘yield’ to his interlocutors’ rage for explanation, to misquote the opening quote from Freud. But the man in the music video for *Just*, by the English band Radiohead, does yield. Lying in the middle of the street, he finally gives up the secret; gives in to the increasingly agitated and hostile demands of the passers-by who gradually assemble around him (including a policeman, another man of the law), demanding to know why he is lying there. (But note: the ‘dialogue’ in the video is conveyed by subtitles: viewers do not hear any of the words; they *read* them. And they are not the words that Thom Yorke, the frontman of Radiohead, is singing as he watches the drama unfold from an upstairs window). Possible explanations (analyses) are volunteered by people in the crowd - he must be hurt; he must be drunk; he must be mad. “You don't think that there's any point, right?” asks the most vehement onlooker. “What, that we're all going to die?” The man dismisses all inquiries. Finally however, always in subtitles, he yields: "Yes I'll tell you, I'll tell you why I'm lying here... but God forgive me... and God help us all... because you don't know what you ask of me." The camera focuses in on the man’s face, but the subtitles disappear, so that we, the viewers/analysts/seekers of explanation, never do get to know what the message ‘is’. And as the camera zooms out again we see that everyone is now lying on the ground. So the enigma at the heart of the silence remains. The voicing of the secret at the
heart of speech does not result in the relief of explanation, but disseminates itself in a bigger, more paralysing silence.


Something is repeated in these three parables. Each carries the trace of something Other at the heart of utterance – something recalcitrant, unspeakable, unreasonable, unanalysable. These silences confound interpretation and manifest, intolerably, the illusory status of speech as full ‘presence’, as living voice. They betray the impossibility of saying, once-and-for all and in-so-many-words, who one is, or what something means, or why someone did what she did. Yet qualitative method has been preoccupied with such longings
for access to the subject’s voice. Methodological discussions have often revolved around precautions for overcoming the resistances that appear to prevent subjects from claiming full voice, or researchers from doing proper analysis. Such discussions are based on the premise that full voice or complete analysis – without silent remainder – are in principle possible, even if in practice fraught with obstacles. Remedies are proposed to overcome the silences and suppressions wrought by nerves, ‘false ‘fronts’, poor memory, bad interview technique, or power imbalances between subject and researcher. (Put the subject at her ease; make the interview feel like a conversation; ‘triangulate’ accounts to check for truth, etc). More transparency from subjects; greater penetration by analysts – these are the incompatible aspirations of method (cf MacLure, 2003: ch 7).

The necessary failure of such attempts, based as they are on the fantasy of presence, means that voice data is always, inevitably, in deficit. Subjects might always have said something more, or something else, or something more true, or something deeper – if they had felt more at ease; if the researcher had asked better questions; or had refrained from asking so many questions; or had ‘shared’ more of herself; or intjected less of herself; if the interview had been held in a less public place; or a more public place; if it had taken place in a group, or had not taken place in a group; if subject and researcher had been of the same sex, or age, or ethnicity, and so on. The silence that haunts voice has prompted a ‘hyperbolicism’ as Derrida puts it, not just of analysis, but of methodological remedies.

Something is repeated in the three parables. Repeated, but also different each time. And repetition is itself the central dynamic of each individual tale – inexorably repeated resistance prompting serial responses. The parables obey the logic of ‘iterability’ - that is, ‘both the repetition of the same and alteration’ (Derrida 1998: 31). Iterability, says Derrida, is the very condition of identity, and indeed of all concepts: a relation between two terms or entities that are ‘the same’ yet, because they repeat one another, are never single and unitary. Iterability ‘perturbs’ analysis because it interferes with the binary and hierarchical distinctions that organise traditional philosophical and everyday discourse – original and copy, self and other, essence and appearance, etc. Iterability demands a different kind of analysis, one that is capable of attending to what resists analysis - ‘the phenomena of anomaly, accident, the marginal, and the parasitic’ (32).

The compulsion to repeat has, since Freud, also been associated of course with death, in the form of the repetition compulsion or death drive. Derrida argues in his reading of Bartleby alongside Freud that the repetition compulsion ‘is’ precisely the ‘hyperbolic resistance of nonresistance’, a meaningless resistance that sets in motion/permits a glimpse of something uncanny and spectral in the solid edifices of sense and identity. Bartleby, Derrida notes, has long been viewed by literary critics as a figure of death, and he reminds readers of Bartleby’s rumoured previous employment, at the office of dead letters in Washington. The video of Just explicitly points to the death-like silence, or secret, that undoes language and reason. There is something uncanny about the way the Bartleby ‘effect’ has repeated through literature, popular culture and criticism. Its parabolic status for critics, philosophers and psychoanalysts testifies to the power of literature and artworks to voice secrets that philosophy and other disciplines cannot catch from within their own confines (cf Derrida, 1990). Bartleby, the Scrivener takes its place alongside other works whose power to ‘perturb’ the conventional structures of Enlightenment reason has made them parables for poststructuralism – Poe’s Purloined Letter, Velasquez’ Las Meninas, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (cf Stronach 2006).

We suggest that a focus on the circuits of silence in speech data might create similar perturbations in the analytic practices of qualitative method. The aim would be do the kind of analysis that is attuned to the antics of iterability – to that which resists analysis and, to re-quote Derrida, appears as ‘anomaly, accident,
the marginal, and the parasitic” (1998: 32). This might include dwelling on moments of disconcertion (cf. Taussig, 1993) – points of unease or seeming failure in research encounters, where tacit expectations of ‘proper’ interview conduct or ‘good’ data are momentarily thrown into disarray, to the discomfort of the analyst or interviewer. Such instances are often forgotten or smoothed over in the official documents of research (reports, journal articles etc). But the silence that surrounds these fleeting moments hints at places where something unanalysable might be irrupting into the precarious order of the research encounter. Consider the following exchange, from an interview that was carried out as part of a life history project (‘MM’ is Maggie MacLure).

**Trompe l’oeil interview**

Prof X …I was rescued at the eleventh hour from a life of complete complacency by going to Cambridge and being shown there was a class system [laughs]

MM [laughs] Do you think that was a risk though?

Prof X I think there’s always a risk, you know. I mean it was a real trauma and awful at the time, but curiously I think looking back, I’m quite grateful that I, it probably was a rescue.

MM Probably formative?

Prof X Yeah. I think I could, if I hadn’t had that I might have just been a complete complacent bastard

MM [laughs]

Prof X As it was, this was postponed for several years [laughs]

This exchange never made it into any project reports or related articles. (It has however enjoyed an after-life as an example in various publications by MacLure (eg 2003; 2006), who seems strangely compelled to repeat it.) The exchange seems to resist analysis. Is Professor X revealing or concealing himself? Does the jokey tenor of the exchange disqualify it as ‘serious’ data? Why does the interviewer feels mocked by Professor X’s self-mockery, and undone by the way he flips between this and seemingly ‘straight’ disclosure?

Our interest is not in overcoming the resistance to analysis in this exchange - in finding possible solutions to the puzzle of what it ‘really’ means, or what ‘caused’ it (eschatology or archaeology). We do not want to pursue, for instance, the possibility that Professor X was ‘being defensive’; or hiding something; or that there may have been gender ‘effects’ at work in the interactional dynamics. Those are all legitimate avenues of inquiry, so long as research continues to be done solely under the auspices of ‘Enlightenment Reason’ whose business, as Derrida notes, is ‘to render reason from meaning by posing questions about the origin, by returning to the elementary, by breaking things down and deriving’ (1998: 35). We want to remain instead with the miniature ‘ordeal’ of the double bind that the example presents.
The problematic of this example – its capacity to deflect analysis and momentarily perturb the interviewer/analyst – has some similarities to trompe l’oeil painting and sculpture. The trompe l’oeil ‘fools the eye’ by imitating the depicted object so convincingly that the viewer is momentarily seized by an inability to tell the difference between original and copy, reality and representation. Writers on trompe l’oeil almost always refer to a fleeting moment of pleasurable disorientation produced in the spectator, in terms such as frisson, shock, surprise or vertigo. Unable to deploy the usual strategies for penetrating ‘through’ the picture to the meaning, object or reality that lies behind, beyond or above (in other words, analysing it), the viewer is fleetingly trapped in an strange space where the usual distance between subject and object has suddenly vanished. The picture seems to ‘look back’ at the viewer, deflecting her gaze rather than allowing it to penetrate ‘through’ the plane of representation to what lies beyond.

Illustration 2. Victor Dubreuil ‘The Eye of the Artist’. c 1898

The effects of the trompe l’oeil have frequently been associated with the uncanny, and thus with death, haunting, hallucination or magic (Badie, nd, Bryson, 1990, Baudrillard, 1998; MacLure, 2003). The uncanny, according to Bresnick, is an ‘experience that momentarily undoes the factitious monological unity of the ego’ (quoted in Royle, 2003: 17), and something like this seems to happen in the fragment above. Professor X’s dissimulating candour blocks the two main tactics generally available to interviewers – ie self-effacing empathy or interpretive mastery - leaving this particular interviewer somewhat at a loss.

The interview fragment is further comparable to trompe l’oeil in that it draws attention to the surface – to the technique that has been used to produce the illusion. Levine (1998) notes that one of the most despised features of trompe l’oeil for critics such as Ruskin was that attracted attention to the skills of the artist. Denied the ability to penetrate or elevate the art-work, and so deliver its truth, viewes could only admire the artist’s facile competence. The deflections of the life history fragment likewise divert attention to the creaky stage machinery of interview technique and the necessary illusion involved in trying to get access to ‘inner’ things such as a person’s thoughts, or his authentic self, or the stuff that lies beneath his silences.
The ‘ambivalent sincerity’ of Professor X’s self description hints at the element of ‘camp performance’ in all self-identifications, as argued by Travers (1993). Professor X and MM are caught forging their own signatures as ‘interviewee’ and ‘interviewer’, momentarily confronted with the insufficiency of the ‘squeamish reciprocity’ that shakily secures the compact between performer and audience, or interviewee and analyst.

We suspect that similar silences surround other disconcerting moments ‘in’ research data. Such ‘trompe l’œil’ silences do not necessarily involve an absence of speech: they do not mark a pause or quietude where something could or should have been said. They are not necessarily cover-ups either - places where something specific has been suppressed, or come to meaning in an improper way. Rather, such silences might be the silences of the unspoken or the unthought – of those utterly recalcitrant ‘remainders’ that will never deliver up sense, but which make the making of sense possible. French words seem strangely appropriate (if also slightly pretentious) here – impensé, informe, déjouer.⁹

The resistance of frivolity

The trompe l’œil interview fragment highlights the problematic status of humour within qualitative method. Like silence, humour seldom seems to be a good thing for the serious projects of research. This came to our notice during a project that was investigating young men’s attitudes and practices around health (see MacLure et al, 2006, for a report on the project). Like other researchers who have worked with young men, we found that humour was a pervasive feature of the boys’ interactions, both amongst themselves, and in interviews. Periods of collective fooling around; not giving a ‘straight’ answer to a question, especially if a sexual connotation could be found; mocking each others’ sexual orientation; making outrageous allegations of bad behaviour – these were all common features of the boys’ interactions. (‘Damien’s gay!’ ‘Frank sucks bum-hole. Would you like to hear him scream like a girl?’ ‘Dom’s an alkie’ (alcoholic)). Questions about personal problems or feelings were often met with sexual banter.

As noted above, humour is almost always represented (when it is acknowledged) as a problem for research and intervention. For instance, it may be read as a sign of faulty research design and a failure to get at young men’s ‘real’ feelings – a result of interview effects associated with age, unequal power relations or gender; or a failure to put the participants at ease; or deliberate resistance to the inquiry (Allen 2005; Sixsmith & Griffiths, nd). Humour is also often seen as a negative, or even dysfunctional feature of young men’s culture itself. Noticing how humour is used to patrol the boundaries of masculine identity, and to perpetrate sexist stereotypes, some researchers conclude that it is inevitably conservative (Billig, 2002; Sixsmith & Griffiths, nd), and therefore an impediment to social interventions.

Humour is generally read therefore as resistance – to self-reflection, social amelioration and indeed to research itself. And despite its noisy clamour, humour is also associated with silence – it is taken as filling a space where something meaningful and serious should have been said. “Humour was also an effective way of silencing talk about health, as well as policing the boundaries of accepted masculine behaviour”, Sixsmith & Griffiths report in their study of men’s health (nd: 34; our italics). Humour is an offence against ‘presence’ therefore. It is a mark of fakery, displacement and concealment, and is often treated in research contexts as a resistance to be overcome so that the authentic voice can be heard.

Derrida (1980) identifies frivolity with the economy of the supplement: as différence that endlessly frustrates the desire of presence. He notes philosophy’s long-standing fear of contamination by literature – of being poisoned by stylistic pretension and thus losing its access to truth or generality. Smith, discussing Derrida’s reading, spells out the resistant character of frivolity.
The comedy or baseness of frivolity lies in the fact that unlike tragedy it cannot easily be
generalised out into statements on the ‘human condition’ as it used to be called. Frivolity is light
and unserious, and yet it is base, heavy, leaden or bathetic because it resists elevation to
generality; not enough of the Hegelian spirit, the spirit of reason, lightens it (in both senses).
(Smith, 1995: 27)

Comedy is always a camp performance therefore. It blocks elevation and empathy, and resists analysis.
The task of method is, precisely, to get rid of frivolity. ‘The method for reducing the frivolous is method
itself. In order not to be the least frivolous, being methodic suffices’. (Derrida, 1980: 125)

We want to suggest that method might find other ways of handling humour. Rather than seeing it only as a
problem, and keeping silent about it or trying to cure it, there is a need to understand more about how
humour works in the fabrication of interactions, including research encounters. One advantage of moving
away from a view of humour as an offence against presence is that this might disturb the discourse of
deficit that surrounds the topic. In its drive to eradicate humour, method always ends up finding someone,
or something lacking. (This is, of course, the inevitable cause/outcome of the desire of presence). As we
have seen, the fault may be found to lie with the researcher, the research subjects, or some feature of the
‘setting’. In the case of research with young men, the usual suspects are the young men themselves, or
their masculine ‘culture’. A more nuanced and less forensic attitude to humour might allow us to recognise
its productive role in maintaining solidarity and identity, and to respect its value for marginalised groups as
a form of resistance to power and inequality – even where this resistance manifests itself uncomfortably in
the research/intervention situation as also a resistance to analysis. This would not mean endorsing or
overlooking the misogyny and prejudice that is often coded into such humour. But it would mean also
considering the positive qualities that humour involves – such as skill, timing, collaboration and quick-
wittedness. Humour also relies on a kind of ‘double vision’ – the ability to see the absurdity, irony or double
meanings in social situations. Much of the joking that circulates in young men’s talk shows an astute, if
often jaundiced, understanding of their own and others’ social roles and status. It is not surprising that
humour, silence and the ambivalent respect of mimicry have been identified as the strategies of subaltern
subjects faced with disciplinary power (cf Bhabha, 1994). ‘Lies, secrets, silences and deflections of all
sorts are routes taken by voices or messages not granted full legitimacy in order not to be altogether lost’,

Conclusion. Or remainder.
Qualitative and ‘participatory’ research approaches often seem to be built on the assumption that ‘good’
communication involves sharing perspectives, equal collaboration, ‘meaningful’ talk, being serious, and ‘in-
depth conversational engagement’ (see for example Sixsmith 2004: 6). From this point of view, participants
who remain silent or engage in humour (and not only young men) may be judged not to have opened their
mouths properly, to return to Freud and the title of this paper. They may therefore appear deficient as
communicators and as agents in their own well being. From such a point of view, silence and humour are
part of the same problematic. Both resist analysis. They are seen to displace or replace something that
should have taken place. But we have argued, after Derrida, that displacement and replacement are the
‘originary complications’ of meaning, and that something unanalysable and unspeakable will always
‘remain’. Silences and jokes may be traces of those remainders, and therefore worthy of our attention.
This does not mean abandoning analysis as traditionally conceived. Derrida stresses the ‘double constraint’, indeed the double bind, of analysis under deconstruction: ‘on the one hand, to inherit and take inspiration from [the] Enlightenment […]; on the other hand, to analyse tirelessly the resistance that still clings to the thematic of the simple and the indivisible origin’ (1998: 34; original emphasis). To deconstruct is not to ‘suspend the order of reason’ (36), but to commit to an interminable analysis that continues to seek for reasons and origins, but at the same time acknowledges the ceaseless operation of iterability and the trace that works the margins, unravelling the simple and perturbing that same order of reason.

How to do this is (of course) still an open question for research, and we have few suggestions. We can report, at least, that we have begun to think differently about ways of working with children who are starting to become ‘a problem’ in school, which is the research project on which we are currently working, and from which this paper set out. Returning one last time to where we began (but of course ending up in a different place again), Hannah’s ordeal of silence has prompted us to think about the limits of reason and dialogue in helping children address their troubles in class. Early years pedagogy in the UK places a priority on talking through problems, helping children to understand why their actions are problematic for others, and modelling and enforcing a discourse of ‘being kind’ and ‘helping’. Without suggesting that rational discussion should be abandoned, or that it never ‘works’, Hannah’s silence has led us to think that some of the recurring problems that ‘problem’ children have in class may be ‘beyond reason’ in this dialogic sense. But what would non-rational action involve?
Notes

1 The article is based on a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, as part of the Symposium ‘Making Meaning from Silence’. Chicago, April 2007.

2 ‘Becoming a Problem’ is the title of a research study, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ref. RES-062-23-0105), of the ways in which 5 year olds start to acquire an identity or career as difficult or ‘naughty’. The authors were researchers on that project, and Hannah’s story emerged as/into ‘data’ during one of our project team meetings. The account presented in these opening paragraphs is based on the discussion that ensued. ‘Hannah’ and ‘Mrs Edison’ are pseudonyms.

3 Nurse Ratched was the malign and controlling nurse in Kesey’s (1962) One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, and the film of the same name (Dir. Milos Forman, 1975)

4 Fortunately, though similar in structure, Hannah’s tale does not have the same dénouement as Bartleby, who languishes in prison until he dies, ‘preferring not to’ eat the food paid for by his old employer.

5 Ethnomethodologists say that the tiniest silences between turns at talk – fractions of a second – are ‘oriented to’ by interlocutors, if they are longer than an always-unspecified ‘expected’ duration. Speakers generally do not even know that they are doing this. Even the tiniest snag in the fabric of verbal interaction constitutes a ‘noticeable absence’, bearing consequence and judgement (reg Sacks, Scheglof & Jefferson, 1974).

6 Just (Radiohead), video directed by Jamie Thraves, 1995.


8 As Derrida is at pains to emphasise, this does not mean abandoning Enlightenment rationality and refusing analysis. We return to this point below.

9 Words associated with, respectively, Hal Foster (impensé, re. surrealism’s interference with the projects of modernism), Georges Bataille (informe), and Rosalind Krauss (déjouer).
References


