

## **‘I actually hear you think of me’: Voices, Mediums and Deafness in the Writing of Rosa Praed.**

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On a Saturday afternoon in Chelsea, London in June 1928, Rosa Praed, the prolific expatriate Australian novelist, used a medium to communicate with her companion Nancy Harward, who had died the previous year. Praed asked Harward, ‘Do you hear your friend?’ The answer, written through the hand of the medium, came as follows: ‘I do. I should hear you without contact’ (Praed Papers 7/11/1). This exchange signifies a number of intersecting issues pertaining to Praed’s relationship with hearing: her use of writing and reading to listen to voices from other worlds; her interest in telepathy, which required neither sign nor sound to convey a meaning; and her companionship with Harward, which could be seen as displacing her deaf daughter Maud. Praed’s relationship with Maud has not yet received sustained attention, even as critical approaches have expanded scholarship on her work. Patricia Clarke, in her admirable biography of Praed, outlines the details of Maud’s deafness and the grief it caused, however her observation that Praed ‘was fortunate to arrive in London at a time when teaching deaf children to speak, referred to as the ‘oral’ method, was spreading from the Continent’ (48) belies the enormous physical and emotional cost of this approach for many deaf people, including Maud. Additionally, the expression of disability in Praed’s literary output and her practice of listening to the dead through writing, even as she did not contemplate listening to her daughter through sign language – the writing of hands – has not been explored. This paper seeks to reclaim the overlooked figure of Maud, and to articulate how Praed’s notions of sound and voice impacted upon her deaf daughter.

Matilda Elizabeth Praed was born in Brisbane on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1874. She was described by her mother as ‘winning and pretty’ (Murray-Prior Papers, Box 5, Folder 33, 19/35) while her pet name was ‘the Bird of Paradise’ or ‘Birdie’ (Clarke 37). When she was two years old, just before the Praed family set sail for England, it was discovered that Maud couldn’t hear. Her uncle rang a bell near her ears, but she didn’t react. Praed didn’t think that Maud had been born deaf, remarking in a letter to her stepmother Nora that Maud had once ‘started at the slam of a door’ (Murray-Prior Papers, Box 5, Folder 33, 19/35). Praed conjectured that Maud might have lost her hearing when they were living on Curtis Island off the coast of Rockhampton. She noticed an unpleasant smell coming from her daughter’s ears, but instead of taking Maud, then four months old, to a doctor across the strait to the mainland (which would have been difficult regardless), she syringed the ears. When the smell cleared, she thought nothing more of it (Clarke 40). Maud’s medical notes from 1902, however, state that she had ‘been stone deaf since a severe attack of ScF [scarlet fever] in early infancy’ (3473/3/6 Case Book).

Although Praed had access to her father’s library and was a knowledgeable observer of his involvement in politics, her limited education would not have prepared her for raising a deaf child. She was born in 1851 at Bromelton, a property beside the Logan River in Queensland and the family moved between Brisbane and other properties bought and sold by her father. She was educated by a governess from age eleven until fourteen and by her mother, who died of consumption when Praed was seventeen. Praed’s first thoughts on arranging Maud’s future

were, as she wrote to Nora, ‘if it should be that she was born deaf we must have her taught at Home’. She resolved that ‘[a]s soon as we get to London we shall take her to a good aurist and learn the truth’ (Murray-Prior Papers, Box 5, Folder 33, 19/35). In a letter written when she was thirty-one, Maud refers to ‘Dr Cumberbatch, the eminent oral surgeon’, suggesting that Praed had Maud’s throat and speech examined in the hope of a cure (3473/3/6 Case Book).

In London, it must have become clear to Praed that Maud’s hearing loss was permanent, for in 1880, four years after their arrival in England, she decided against home tutoring and enrolled her six-year-old daughter in a school run by a teacher training college, the Society for Training Teachers of the Deaf and the Diffusion of the ‘German’ system. This school was established at Ealing, London, in 1878 by British Member of Parliament, Benjamin St John Ackers, whose only child was deaf. Wanting to give his daughter the best possible education, he visited schools in Europe and America, returning to England a firm believer in the ‘German’ system, which taught deaf children to speak, as opposed to the ‘French’ system, which taught them to communicate using sign language. It is uncertain how Praed came to know of or decide upon the school for Maud, but it may have been because the Ealing College had boarding facilities and Praed was then living with Campbell and their sons in the Midlands.

The motivations behind Praed’s decision to have Maud speak rather than sign are clearer. It was initially believed that deaf people were more like animals than humans because speech was aligned with reason. In *Lend Me Your Ear*, deaf rhetorician Brenda Jo Brueggemann notes that in the Enlightenment, the voice was the vessel of reason, and reason was the essence of being human. She explains, ‘[t]he syllogism created – rhetorical, faulty, and enthymematic as it is – sounds like this: *Language is human; speech is language; therefore, deaf people are inhuman, and deafness is a problem*’ (11). Further to this, it was believed that spiritual consciousness could not be acquired if a person could not hear the words of God. The Christian church therefore claimed that to teach deaf people speech, let alone educate them, was a contravention of God’s will. This notion continued for close to two thousand years, until it was discovered in Spain in the sixteenth century through monks such as Fray Pedro Ponce de Leon, who taught the deaf children of aristocratic Spanish families, that deaf people could be taught to speak, a method which became known as ‘oralism’. Meanwhile in France, Abbé de l’Épée, a philanthropist who chanced upon two deaf sisters signing in the Parisian streets, founded a school in 1760 that taught children sign language.

In England, as in Spain, efforts to teach deaf people to speak were confined to the nobility until Thomas Braidwood established the first school for the deaf in Edinburgh in 1715. This school also focussed upon teaching deaf children speech. When Braidwood died in 1786, his institutions and his oral methods became unpopular, and signing, promoted by devotees of Abbé de l’Épée from France, held sway. In mainland Europe, oralism continued, and this was the method Benjamin St John Ackers chanced upon on his travels and brought back to England.

At the time that Praed would have been looking into arrangements for Maud’s education, the oral method was once more coming into vogue, especially after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* in 1859. The theory of evolution reinforced the perception of deaf people as animals by linking speech to humanity and sign language to animality (Esmail 121). It also influenced the prevailing ideas about eugenics that circulated at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the arguments for oralism was that it would encourage deaf people

to mix with and marry hearing people, thereby reducing the occurrence of congenital deafness (although, as H-Dirkson L. Bauman notes, less than four percent of deaf children are born to one or more deaf parents).

The most famous proponent of oralism was Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, whose wife and mother were deaf. Both women communicated through lip-reading. Bell was head of The Eugenics Section of the American Breeders Association, and in 1883 he published *Memoir Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, which opens with an observation on the selective breeding of domestic animals and the suggestion that ‘if we could apply selection to the human race we could also produce modifications or varieties of men’ (3). This was problematic, Bell continued, because ‘the intermarriage of congenital deaf-mutes through a number of successive generations should result in a formation of a deaf variety of the human race’ (4). Benjamin St John Ackers echoed this language of eugenics in an essay included in *For Their Sakes* (1884), the volume Praed edited to raise money for Maud’s school: ‘[i]f the deaf are unable to mix comfortably with hearing persons, they will naturally shrink from them; be drawn to others like themselves; marry those similarly afflicted and so, alas, too often hand down and increase the evil’ (41). According to these writers, deafness not only conferred connotations of animality, but also criminality and corruption.

While there are no references in Praed’s archive to suggest that she thought of her daughter directly in these terms, it is impossible not to overlook the language she deployed when writing about deafness. In her introduction to *For Their Sakes*, for example, Praed recommended the teaching of spoken language to deaf children to lift them out of darkness:

Most pitiful it is to look into the yearning eyes of a dumb child. Full of pathetic protest, they seem to ask, ‘What is this mystery of life?’ Why am I condemned to stand apart without voice or hearing?’

Then, when after patient groping, the clue is found and language gained! What joy when the child can read from the lips of those around – when it can ask questions and understand the answers! What a different place the world, a little while ago so dreary, seems now to the poor little wondering thing! The mournful face begins to brighten; games and laughter are no longer meaningless; the closed mind gradually unfolds; the struggling thoughts find vent; and the active brain reasons. It is as though a great wall had been knocked down: silence and solitude upon one side; companionship, sympathy, interest – all that makes life worth living – on the other. (v)

In this account there is a contrast between light and dark, mournfulness and brightness, dumbness and intelligence, terms that echo the representation of Indigenous subjects in colonial discourse. As Ania Loomba notes in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* the ‘late medieval European figure of the ‘wild man’ who lived in forests, on the outer edges of civilisation, and was hairy, nude, violent, lacking in moral sense and excessively sensual’ often seemed to coincide with constructions of the ‘other’ in colonial discourse (57-8). The uneducated deaf person appeared to be similarly animalistic and barbarous because they could not speak eloquently.

Praed’s connection between language and a lack of civilisation is illuminated in novels such as *Fugitive Anne* (1902). The protagonist of this lost race romance, Anne, has an Aboriginal servant named Kombo, who is described as ‘well tamed, having been taken young from his

tribe' and who, when he set out to find his family, 'would cast off the garments of civilisation and relapse into his original condition of barbarism' (9). Kombo's culture and language are referred to in terms that suggest primitivism, an impression reinforced by the contrast between the 'magic' of Anne's voice when she sings in her 'glorious contralto in a hymn' (8) and Kombo's broken English. Although Anne converses with Kombo in his own language, the reader is not made privy to their words, suggesting that Praed considered them incomprehensible or insignificant.

Critics have also commented on Praed's descriptions of class and race. Len Platt, in his essay on race and romance in Praed's Australian novels, notes that they are 'awash with ...discourses of breeding and blood applied in the contexts of race and nation' (35). He cites several examples from novels including *Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land* (1915), *Policy and Passion* (1881) and *Outlaw and Lawmaker* (1893), but this thematic prominence is apparent from the opening pages of Praed's first novel, *An Australian Heroine* (1880), in which the protagonist Esther is described as 'high-bred in every line' (7). Meanwhile, in her memoir *My Australian Girlhood* (1902), Praed's confabulated description of her father's involvement in the Hornet Bank massacre of Aborigines exculpates 'the white colonists [who instigated the massacre] by demonstrating that they pitted civilisation against savagery' (McKay 53). While her representations of Aborigines can be interpreted as sympathetic, recent criticism has stressed the complicity of colonial women writers as less than 'innocent bystanders' of the '(masculine) process of dispossession and the establishment of the colonial order' (McKay 53). Likewise, Praed's conviction in the superiority of written and spoken English over the language of deaf culture reveals her involvement in a different form of colonialism, even as she undoubtedly believed that she was acting in Maud's best interests in teaching her to speak. This impulse may have stemmed from her association of the voice with connection and comfort.

### Grotesque Sound

From the beginning of her *oeuvre*, Praed used the voice to signify reassurance in a threatening world. In her first novel, *An Australian Heroine*, the protagonist Esther describes to an Englishman the experience of being left alone in the bush:

The branches are twisted, and the creepers twine round them, and hang like long snakes. As dusk comes on, the dead trunks seem to be skeletons, and the bottle trees are like women in white dresses. When it was night I lay down upon a bank and tried to sleep, but there were curious noises all round me. Curlews were screeching, and creeping things seemed to be crawling on every side of me, and the native dogs howled till I thought they must want to eat me. (46-47)

The visual and aural qualities of Esther's experience – the snakes, skeletons and ghostly woman, the screeching, creeping and howling – are contorted by her fear. They have become grotesque, a term defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'characterised by distortion or unnatural combinations' or 'fantastically extravagant'. In their study of this mode, Edwards and Graulund draw on literary critic Philip Thomson's definition of the grotesque as '*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*' (Thomson's italics; Thomson 27). The 'disjunctions between the vile and the comic, disgust and irony' that may be found in the grotesque 'provoke incongruities and uncertainties arising out of the irreconcilable dimensions of grotesque forms' (2-3). Rather than leading to a 'conceptual dead-end', this offers 'a creative force for conceptualizing the indeterminate that is produced by distortion'

(3). This irresolution echoes Praed's ambivalence regarding her inhabitation of the Australian bush.

In *Australian Life Black and White*, she further amplifies the grotesque qualities of the bush. A few pages into the text, she plunges her reader into an account of the scrub as white settlers would have perceived it. As in *My Australian Girlhood*, she empties the environment of Aboriginal people in her description of it as 'wild, vast, and desolate; all the same monotonous grey colouring, except where the wattle when in blossom shows patches of feather gold, or a belt of scrub lies green, glossy and impenetrable as Indian jungle' (6). She then follows this visual description with a vivid rendering of the acoustics of the bush:

The solitude seems intensified by the strange sounds of reptiles, birds, and insects, and by the absence of larger creatures; of which, in the daytime, the only audible signs are the stampede of a herd of kangaroo, or the rustle of a wallabi [sic] or dingo stirring the grass as it creeps to its lair. But there are the whirring of locusts, the demoniac chuckle of the laughing jackass, the screeching of cockatoos and parrots, the hissing of the frilled lizard, and the buzzing of innumerable insects hidden under the dense undergrowth. And then, at night, the melancholy wailing of the curlews, the dismal howling of dingoes, the discordant croaking of tree-frogs, might well shake the nerves of a solitary watcher (7).

The impenetrability of the bush (described as an 'Indian jungle' to convey its density to British readers, who might have been more familiar with this topography) is replicated through the hubbub of sound Praed uses: whirring, chuckling, hissing, screeching, buzzing and croaking. However her selection of adjectives – demoniac, melancholy, dismal, discordant – tips these sounds towards the grotesque. Fear and loneliness warp the way in which they are received by the ear, indicating that Praed's characters are displaced in their environment.

### Sound and Succour

Although sound was a source of terror and distress, signifying white settlers' inability to read and comfortably inhabit the Australian bush, it was also a source of succour and respite for Praed and her characters. In *An Australian Heroine*, Esther's fear of her surroundings is mitigated by the appearance of her dead mother in spirit form:

I don't think that I ever felt so frightened in my life; and then my mother came and stood beside me. That is why I think that the dead *may* come back, but it was only the one time. I have heard her, but I have never seen her since. (46-7)

Like a child frightened by invisible creatures beneath the bed, the voice of Esther's mother provides reassurance amid the cacophony of her imagination.

Esther's account of her mother is a fictionalised rendition of events that occurred in Praed's life when she was newly married and living on the remote Curtis Island. At age seventeen, soon after her mother's death, Praed acquired a degree of freedom and responsibility, accompanying her father to Brisbane for his political business and running the house in the Queensland bush. After this brief interlude of autonomy, her marriage to Campbell Praed in 1872 came as a shock, particularly after they moved to the island. Hemmed in by oppressive

scrub and perpetually harassed by mosquitoes, Praed found the conditions primitive. Her husband was often away on business in Brisbane and her isolation engendered a need for a kindred spirit. To assuage it, she used automatic writing to contact her dead mother and ask for help. A piece of paper in Praed's archives begins with many crossed out words, principally, 'My' then 'no yes' following one another, until the letter forms, with almost all of the words joined to one another:

My dear Rosie

Go to bed you are tired God loves you and will help you you [sic] were better this evening persevere and try to be bright and cheerful you had better go to Gladstone yes for a little time but do stay too long your place is by your husband Stay till the McKennas go then you had better come back You are sleepy and I cannot write now Good night darling I am with you God is with you try not to be bad tempered tomorrow You will succeed in time and then you will be so happy only pray to God (Praed Papers 3/7/3).

As Clarke indicates in her biography, Praed's mother's response reflected Praed's knowledge, either conscious or subconscious, that there was no more possibility of escape from her marriage than there was of leaving Curtis Island (36). She was as lonely as the colonisers in *Australian Life Black and White*, trapped in an environment they could not understand. In this context, her mother's 'voice', whether real or imagined, provided a means of alleviating isolation.

This tendency to make connections through voices became pronounced in Praed's relationship with Nancy Harward. Harward was introduced to Praed in 1899 by Alfred Sinnett, who had contributed to *For Their Sakes*. The attraction between the two women, which Praed always described in terms of the spiritual, was immediate. A few weeks later, Harward moved in with Praed, who was by this time separated from her husband. They remained together until Harward's death nearly thirty years later.

Harward and Praed embarked upon a collaborative writing practice that involved Harward, under hypnosis, taking on the persona of Nyria, a German princess enslaved in Rome in 79 AD. In this guise Harward spoke in 'a light, child-like babble, with plenty of shrewd observation, displaying keen judgement of character about scenes, persons and conversations that she described as going on at the time around her' (Praed, *Nyria* viii). However, she was unconscious of what she was saying. It was only Praed, taking down her voice and weaving it into a novel entitled *Nyria* (1904), who made them real.

For Praed, this psychic collaboration was a vehicle for expressing and sustaining her love for Harward. She believed that she was the current incarnation of Valeria, Nyria's friend, and that the upheavals in her life, which included her daughter's deafness and mental illness, were payment for wrongs Valeria had committed. Praed maintained, according to a transcript in her archives, that her relationship with Nancy had begun 'some two or three hundred years after the submergence of Atlantis in about 9000 B.C.' and continued in various incarnations in South Africa, Italy, North Africa and France (Praed Papers, 1A/5/1). In documenting their previous lives – whether real or imagined – and by presenting Nyria and Valeria as another step in this evolutionary process, Praed sought to validate her relationship with Harward. If this relationship had existed for aeons, it would continue for aeons more (White, 113).

This understanding prompted Praed to reach Harward in a similar way after Harward's death

in 1927. She employed the services of Hester Dowden, a medium who professed to have communicated with Oscar Wilde after his death. As with her contact with her mother, Praed was only able to hear Harward's voice by reading what was written through Dowden's automatic writing. In their conversations, Harward offered solace, advice on the novel Praed was writing (*Soul of Nyria*), the outline of a play 'in her sphere' and thoughts on the conditions of their souls (Praed papers 7/11/1 and 12/6/1). On 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1928, Harward said to Praed, via Dowden's writing, 'your thoughts are so clear to me that it seems much less confusing than a conversation. The meaning of words is fuller than the words themselves. I actually hear you think of me' (Praed papers 12/6/1). Here, Praed's thoughts exceeded language altogether, and were absorbed by Harward in the form of a kind of telepathy.

### Displacing the Deaf

The term 'telepathy,' coined by Frederic Myers in 1882, means 'to feel at a distance' (Luckhurst 70). In his introduction to *Phantasms of the Living* (1886), his colleague from the Society for Psychical Research, Frank Podmore, defined it as 'all classes of cases where there is reason to suppose that the mind of one human being has affected the mind of another, without speech uttered, or word written, or sign made' (Gurney xxxv). It offered the opportunity to be inside another's mind, so that every thought and feeling was understood immediately, without an intermediary. The concept of telepathy was prompted by new advances in science and technology towards the end of the nineteenth century that held out, as Pamela Thurschwell notes, 'the promise of previously unimaginable contact with people' (3). She continues, '[t]eletechnologies such as the telegraph and telephone suggested that science could help annihilate distances that separate bodies and minds from each other' not only in life, but also in death (3). If one could hear a disembodied voice on the telephone, for example, or receive a message via telegraph, it seemed logical that one might hear the dead from a distance as well. Peter Fripp was of this opinion; recounting his sittings with Hester Dowden in *The Book of Johannes* (1945), he referred to the process of communicating with spirit controls as 'rather as if one could ring them up on the telephone' (12). Steven Connor also notes the numerous synchronicities between the telegraph and spiritual communications (1999 and 2000). Praed's characterisation of the telegraph operator Polly in *The Romance of a Station* (1889) exemplifies Connor's point. Polly literally enacts the absorption of knowledge through the sound of the machine:

Polly's knowledge of the world was chiefly derived from the telegraphic messages which were incessantly clicking through the house, and which practice from infancy enabled her to read by sound as they ran. In this way Polly must have acquired a mass of miscellaneous information, for the Cape was a through station, and all messages, political, departmental, European, and otherwise, flashed along the line ... She had got in the way of making long and short pauses on her words, as if she were keeping time to the telegraph needle; and her face wore, when she was silent, an abstracted listening look, such as I have seen on the faces of mediums who were supposed to be carrying on communication with an unseen world. (74-5)

Praed's conflation of Polly with a medium – one that is almost mechanistic in her hearing and speech – echoes Connor's meditations on the automaton in the context of historical attempts to reproduce speech. Referring to efforts by oralists to force the deaf to speak so as to demonstrate that they had a sense of self, Connor suggests that

...the more those who endeavoured to teach spoken language to the deaf drew upon mechanisms, whether they were actual automata, or automatic systems for transcribing and reproducing spoken sounds, the more they laid themselves open to the accusation that, instead of giving souls to the deaf, they were turning them into machines. (350)

This conflation of a deaf person with a machine that spoke was eventually achieved by Alexander Graham Bell through his invention of the telephone. As Connor explains,

...if in one sense the deaf had no place at all in this new technology, in another sense they were at the core of its process. For the machine which allowed all this long-range speaking and listening to go on was profoundly *deaf* to the messages it delivered. (357-8)

Ironically, Praed's enchantment with mediums and their voices (however mechanical), and her belief in the voice as a manifestation of a soul such as her mother's or Nyria's, may have motivated her to compel Maud to communicate with her voice rather than her hands. In doing so, she denied Maud a fluent means of self-expression and demonstrated that it was not her daughter who was deaf, but herself.

### Reading Hands and Hearts

Deaf people who sign with one another are not deaf; it is only when a deaf person needs to communicate with a hearing person who cannot sign that their disability is made apparent. However, because of the long history of oralism, deaf people have been compelled to interact with hearing people through lip-reading. This is particularly galling because, for most deaf people, lip-reading requires vast reserves of energy and concentration, whereas sign language is much less taxing. Donna McDonald, author of *The Art of Being Deaf*, has been profoundly deaf since birth, but was educated through lip-reading. She expended significant amounts of effort and discipline learning to speak:

Without knowledge, without speech, and immersed in my world of visual, tactile, and intuitive but noiseless senses, I was coaxed, dragooned, and persuaded into the world of hearing, a world of bubbles, balloons, and fingers placed on lips to learn the shape, taste, and feel of sounds, their push and pull of air through tongue and lips. (55)

Despite the work entailed, it is clear that Praed wanted Maud to speak, as the voice was a means by which she made intense emotional connections. Praed was also receptive to nineteenth century theories of consciousness, prompted by emerging technologies such as the telegraph, and she may have thought that reading lips was not far removed from reading books or minds.

For the Victorians, it became apparent that reading enabled one to access places and psyches that were normally enclosed. As Lisa Brocklebank discusses in her essay 'Psychic Reading,' the porousness created by reading meant that mind could absorb ideas with dangerous ease. She observes that the 'latent or marginal states of consciousness that seem to arise from within the individual could actually and thus more accurately enter the individual from external sources: interior and secret thoughts and feelings might well be obtained from novels' (237). In an era where the policing of the self's moral boundaries was a recurring

preoccupation, ‘the wrong kind of reading could threaten behavioural norms predicated on a self-enclosed, unified subject’ (237). Praed encountered such attitudes in the production of her novels. Her editors frequently suggested that she tone down the actions of her characters. George Bentley, for example, who published Praed’s *Policy and Passion* criticised the late night visit made by the male character, Barrington, to Mrs Vallancy’s house, on moral rather than aesthetic grounds: ‘I think if the questionable house can be altogether eliminated and much of the animal quality of Barrington’s conversation removed or toned down, you can get over the matter very well’ (Praed papers 9/4/10). A few weeks later he continued, ‘[t]he part about going to the house would bring on the same row as when Wilkie Collins had a scene something like it in *Basil*. Indeed, you must rewrite these chapters’ (Praed papers 9/4/13). Chris Tiffin, in his analysis of Praed’s relationship with Bentley, notes that she ‘craved his good opinion and admired his principles even as she kicked against their censoring results’ (114). In this instance, Praed replied to Bentley that she was ‘unreasonably hurt at the imputation of writing crassly’ nevertheless, after sustained and polite protest, she conceded the power of her writing to influence and added that ‘[i]n future I will try to avoid analysis of distasteful things’ (Praed papers 9/4/16a).

Praed was a writer who understood (albeit reluctantly) that readers could be influenced by the placement of words, and who was open to unusual methods of ‘hearing’ and listening to voices from other worlds. Given this, it seems peculiar that she never allowed Maud to hear her, and vice versa, through a different kind of reading altogether: the reading of hands.

Thomas Gallaudet, co-founder of the first American school for the deaf, considered sign a language superior to speech because it brought ‘kindred souls into a much more close and conscious communion than...speech can possibly do’ (quoted in Baynton 221-222). It is ironic, given Praed’s deep investment in the intimacy offered by spiritualism, that she did not recognise the intimacy and communion of sign language. Like many other hearing people, she was deaf to the language of deaf people themselves. In Maud’s case, this had tragic consequences. Had Praed understood and valued the positive qualities of sign language, and had she realised how taxing it is to read lips, she may have retained her close relationship with her daughter. Instead, her belief in the primacy of the voice pushed Maud away.

### **Speaking with Silence**

While Praed could not countenance the spiritual aspects of sign language, she believed implicitly that one could communicate with a soul through the voice, a belief which prompted her long and abiding relationship with Nancy Harward. However, Nancy’s presence aggravated Maud’s already deteriorating mental health, and Maud began to stay with Campbell at his house in Wellingborough for extended periods (Clarke 170). In 1901, however, Campbell died suddenly of a cerebral haemorrhage. Maud, who had been playing chess with him the night before, consequently declined into madness. She ‘developed a delusion that she is accused of having caused the death of her father, & is consequently wanted by the police’ (3473/3/6 Case Book). Praed, ill and stressed, could not cope with this development. In September 1902 she had Maud admitted to Holloway Sanatorium at Virginia Water in Surrey.

Maud’s deafness would have contributed to the trauma of this experience. After her admission to the sanatorium, her doctor observed, ‘[h]er deafness prevents her to a great extent from taking part in the community of the Hospital but she occupies herself with needlework & plays chess well’ (3473/3/6 Case Book). Locked into her own unstable mind, it would have

been extremely difficult for someone to explain to Maud what was happening and to console her. In 1924, Praed wrote to her half-sister Dorothy that Maud

...wants to say things and I can see she is losing her words. If she could be taught again, it would I am sure help her – the baffled, piteous look on her face when she wanted to say something and could not has troubled me much. Of course, she was constantly taught and kept up with things and now there is no one to help her lip-read or teach her. (Murray-Prior papers, Boxes 1-2, Folder 5, Letter 172)

If there was no one there to help Maud read lips, or to speak carefully to her, she must have been painfully lonely as well as frightened. Even before she became unwell, there were signs of her isolation. Eliza Lynn Linton, an astute friend of Rosa's, suggested that Maud might be happier with a deaf companion than her teacher, Miss Boulton (Clarke 110). Living in an institution, away from the people she had depended on all her life, could only have compounded Maud's trauma. It is difficult not to wonder if Maud's decline might have been averted if Praed had realised the potential of communicating in the language of hands.

### Writing Disability

Praed's distress over her daughter made its way into her brief and uneasy representations of disability in her fiction. Her first novel ends with a description of Esther's children – a son who is 'a fine, manly little fellow, and his father's companion out of doors' and 'a lame girl, who is sensitive and dreamy-eyed, and resembles her mother in features' (342). Meanwhile, Praed's novel *Zero* (1884) opens in Monaco with an orchestral performance of the *Danse Macabre*, which is described in a manner that echoes the grotesque sounds of the bush of *Australian Life Black and White*:

At one period the violins send forth a plaintive moan, resembling that of a lost spirit in vain seeking rest; at another, the melody – dirge-like, mysterious, laden with unutterable woe – thrills the ear; and again changes into a rapid measure, grotesquely horrible, almost Satanic in its presentment of unholy revelry. (3)

This description presages the protagonist Varuna's torment in an unhappy marriage and her gambling, which is motivated by her desire to find money to fund her deaf daughter's education. Echoing Praed's belief that Maud's deafness was a punishment for the wrongs of a previous life, Varuna exclaims to her love interest George:

I have sometimes wished, prayed, that my child might die. The maimed speech, the cramped intelligence, the dumb eyes, are living reproaches to me for a wrong unconsciously committed – reminders of an injury which I can never forget or forgive (131).

By the novel's end, Varuna is granted her wish, and the child dies of an illness. As Clarke indicates, Praed thought Maud's existence was 'worse than death', and seems to have channelled her desire to end her daughter's suffering vicariously through fiction (qtd in Clarke, 210). Yet it is perplexing, given Praed's expression of discomfort over her love for and fear of the Australian bush through the grotesque, that she did not articulate her deep distress over Maud's disability through this mode. Given that Maud's body was lacking in hearing, and that grotesque bodies are also 'at time, incomplete, lacking in vital parts, as they sometimes have pieces cut out of them: limbs are missing, to be replaced by phantom limbs'

(Edwards and Graulund 2), the grotesque could have provided Praed with a means of working through a subject that troubled her deeply. Instead, she consigned her fictional daughter to death, and her actual daughter to another kind of death in an asylum. Despite a letter to her doctor asking for release in 1905, Maud was never allowed to go home. She lived there until her death on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1841, at the age sixty-seven years. She had been in the sanatorium for thirty-nine of those years, outliving her entire family.

Given that, for Praed, writing was representative of connection and communion, her relative silence on Maud's deafness bespeaks disavowal and regret, particularly when read alongside the numerous expressions of race, class and sexuality in her oeuvre. Praed's was a mute speech, to use Jacques Rancière's notion that it is not always the lines of a text that speak, but rather a work's silent elements. To demonstrate this concept, Rancière deploys Balzac's story *The Country Parson*, in which a widower atones for a crime in her village by later irrigating the surrounding land. Although Véronique makes a public confession of the crime at the book's end, 'the lines traced by the canals, bringing prosperity to the village, are the text of Véronique's repentance, written on the land itself' (103). Sometimes it is that which cannot literally speak which makes the loudest sound.

Having tried all she thought appropriate to help her daughter, Praed stood helplessly by and watched Maud decline to a level she would have abhorred, if her attitudes to race and language are any indication. In a note to her half-sister Ruth Murray-Prior, written on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1930 after visiting Maud in the institution, Praed wrote, 'Maud was better than usual and there was no trouble as there often is. But it was all very painful' (Murray-Prior Papers, Box 2, Folder 10, Letter 398). Her insistence on the voice as a means of communicating and her inability to recognise the intimacy of sign language, even as she used the vehicle of spiritualism to conduct and certify her great love for Nancy, rendered her deaf to her daughter's psyche. She was not, however, insensible to Maud's predicament. Indeed, her pain on witnessing her daughter's condition was so acute that it could not find expression in the usual modes of her novels. Rather, it could be heard only through a thunderous silence.

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- Praed Papers, John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, OM64-1, Boxes 1-25.