

HISTORY OF OTOTOLOGY

SOME PSYCHOLOGIC ASPECTS OF DEAFNESS: BEETHOVEN, GOYA, AND OSCAR WILDE

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ABSTRACT

A personal experience interested the author in the psychologic aspects of deafness early in his career. It is the purpose of this article to discuss potential clues to change in personality by comparing the work of an artist before and after this handicap.

Three artists were selected: the composer Ludwig van Beethoven, the painter Francisco Goya, and the author Oscar Wilde. The article develops some concepts and suggests continued appraisal.

INTRODUCTION

This article was originally prepared as a relaxed after-dinner speech, to entertain and to stress to the nonmedical audience that we physicians indeed look beyond the purely scientific mechanisms of our patient. As delivered, the talk is supplemented by taped examples of the music of Beethoven, slide reproductions of Goya's more representative paintings, and readings from the poetry of Wilde.

I became strikingly aware of the close relationship between deafness and the emotions early in my residency. It was my obligation to cut down a young man who had hanged himself from the lighting fixture in a bathroom at the hospital. This nineteen-year-old youngster had been admitted for one of the then very new surgical procedures to correct deafness (1951). When he awakened on the day after his operation, his ear was full of packing. He decided that he was not able to hear, wrote a note to his parents, and hanged himself. I am aware that suicide is the strongest form of emotional response; it is also an exceedingly impressive experience for a young physician not only to remove the body, but also to

cope with the attending surgeon, the coroner, and the family. This experience interested me in many of the emotional aspects of people who are deafened. It has occurred to me that it is possible to assess the personality changes related to hearing loss by evaluating the work of an artist before and after this symptom.

There are three artists who became deafened during their creative years: Ludwig van Beethoven, Francisco Goya, and Oscar Wilde. All were exceptional men. Beethoven composed the *Moonlight Sonata* the year he found he was deaf, he would be permanently deafened, and the chances were the deafness would increase. Beethoven (Fig. 1) was born on December 16, 1770, in the attic of a humble dwelling in Bonn, a small university town on the Rhine in Germany. If indeed he had a childhood at all it was most unhappy. His mother was the daughter of a cook and had been a chambermaid prior to her marriage. His father was a "good-for-nothing fellow," an illiterate, a lazy tenor singer, and a drunkard. Beethoven's father wished to exploit the boy's musical talents and turn him to lucrative purposes as a prodigy as early as possible. So by the age of four, Beethoven was compelled to practice both under the



Figure 1. Ludwig van Beethoven.

threat and the pain of physical punishment. His father persisted in this treatment for many years. Ludwig's youth was thus saddened with the anxiety of earning his daily bread by work that was too hard for a boy of his age. When he was eleven years old he was placed in a theater orchestra. At thirteen he became an organist for a chapel. Yet at fourteen he composed the Piano Concerto in E Flat Major. This music is youthful, buoyant, and cheerful. When he was seventeen (1787) his mother died of tuberculosis. He became head of the family, responsible for educating his two younger brothers. He also suffered the humiliation of having to beg welfare for his father, and furthermore having to plead that he be paid the money, lest his father squander it on drink. When he was twenty-two, Beethoven moved to Vienna, then the musical center of Germany (just as it was later to become the medical center of the world). At approximately twenty-six (1796) he wrote in his notebook, "Courage!... my genius shall yet triumph.... This very year the man that I am must reveal himself entirely." However, between this year and the age of thirty (1800) the symptom of deafness became apparent. For several years he kept the secret to himself, avoiding company so his affliction should not be noticed. But at thirty-one he could no longer remain silent. In his despair he confided:

You must know that the best part of me, my hearing, has become very weak. Even at the time we were together I

was aware of the distressing symptoms which I kept to myself; but my condition is now much worse.... Can I ever be cured? Naturally, I hope so; but my hopes are very faint, for such maladies are the least hopeful of all. How sad my life is! For I am obliged to avoid all that are dear to me; and all this in a world miserable and selfish!... How sad is this resignation in which I take refuge! Of course, I have steeled myself to rise above these misfortunes. But how is this going to be possible?

Again he wrote:

I lead a miserable life indeed. For the last two years I have completely avoided all society, for I cannot talk with my fellow men. I am deaf. Had my profession been any other, things might still be bearable; but as it is, my situation is terrible.

And again:

...at the theater, I always have to be quite near the orchestra in order to understand the actor. I cannot hear the high notes of the instruments or the voices, if I am but a little distance off. When anyone speaks quietly I hear only with difficulty.... On the other hand, I find it unbearable when people shout to me.... Often I have cursed my very existence.

And he composed the Sonata Number Twenty-Three known as the *Appassionata*.

The medical aspect of Beethoven's deafness has attracted much attention. There were at least fifty-five medical papers written in English prior to 1975 on the cause of his deafness, and at least seven diseases have been implicated. If we are to believe paravascular infiltration is pathognomonic of syphilis, as was taught by Drs. Warthon, Weller, and others, then presumably Beethoven did have syphilis. This may account for his reluctance to marry and may have been the cause of his deafness. However, he probably had otosclerosis with a neurosensory component.

Through the writings of Plato, Cicero, Plutarch, and a very thorough study of the life of Christ, Beethoven developed resignation to his deafness; he began to emerge from his depressions. At forty-one he wrote both the Seventh and Eighth symphonies, as his spirits improved. His work was now more powerful, more energetic; there were more marching rhythms. I believe Beethoven created his best work at the end of his career, not because of the necessity of earning a living, or because of his basic genius, but because of his philosophic ability to overcome his handicap. Indeed, the Ninth Symphony, which culminates in the Ode to Joy reflects his musical interpretation of the difficulty he had during his life in overcoming his deafness.

Eventually, the princes Kinsky, Lichovsky, and Lebkovitz combined to establish a salary for Beethoven. Unfortunately, he outlived all of these men, and for the Choral Symphony he was given great accolade but no money.

Beethoven's final days were no less depressing than his general life history. He contracted an upper respiratory infection which led to pneumonia. He asked his nephew to secure a physician, and the

young man was two days in returning. By that time, Beethoven had lapsed into a coma. He died at fifty-seven during the climax of a violent storm, a tempest of snow heavily punctuated by thunderclaps.

Sometimes there is humor and good fortune in a patient's emotional response. Once, a young lady who was hard of hearing came to see us; she was preparing for her wedding. She had decided to fix her teeth and correct her hearing loss. She apparently, wanted to present herself at the marriage ceremony in the peak of physical condition. She had a splendid surgical result. However, during one of her postoperative visits, I noticed there was no longer an engagement ring on her finger. When I asked, she informed me that after she was able to hear what the young man had to say, she decided against the marriage!

Francisco Goya (Fig. 2) became deaf suddenly. Indeed, he is said to have lost all of his hearing over the period of two or three days. One might expect that an artist dealing with portraiture, a more visual medium, might be less affected by this handicap than a composer. However, it is my impression that the hearing problem had a far more disastrous effect on this artist than it had on Beethoven.

Goya's father was a guildier and well able to educate his children. The young Goya's aptitude for art was noticed very early, and he was placed in the hands of the foremost local instructors. He had other aptitudes as well, including a love of life, swordsmanship, and women. For reasons that remain somewhat unclear but are clouded in suspicion, he left home at the age of nineteen (1765) for Madrid, where he entered the art academy and came under the influence of two teachers: Menges and Bayeau. The latter subsequently became his brother-in-law. Goya then went to Rome at twenty-three and supported himself as a bullfighter on the trip. He remained an aficionado of the sport all of his life and included in his works a series on "Tauromachy." He left Rome only two years later, again the result of an amorous misadventure. He apparently burglarized a convent in an attempt to abduct one of the novices. The consequences of his being caught were supposed to be immediate death. However, the Spanish Ambassador intervened in his behalf, and he was pardoned but expelled from the Papal State. He made his way back to Madrid where he at last settled down to painting for money. He painted several church frescoes, some work for a charter house, and though he was not religious, he painted a Holy Family and a Crucifixion. At twenty-nine (1775) he married Josepha, the sister of one of his patrons, and she eventually bore him twenty children. The biography of Goya, by Eryan and Holland, is quoted as saying:

As much as Goya loved his wife, he could not avert his gaze from any beauty who happened to flash her eyes upon him. Whatever his contemporaries may have said in disparagement of him, one thing remains abundantly clear, he was attractive to women. At this time, he was rapidly in-



Figure 2. Francisco Goya, a self portrait.

gratiating himself into the high society of the land, and the ladies of the court began to find him not only a painter who flattered their vanity, but an agreeable companion and a gentleman of parts.

At that time, he submitted a series of designs for tapestries (Fig. 3), light, highly colored, full of pastels, reflecting his attitude and exuberant good spirits. At this time also there was some competition in the court among the Queen, who was French, and her Spanish sisters-in-law, The Duchesses of Osunda and Alba. The competition included not only apparel and wit, but also social status and romantic affairs. Goya developed an affection for the Duchess of Alba, but their timing was poor and their discretion bad. The Duchess was banished to her estates in the country by the Queen. Goya became incensed and requested a leave of absence, refusing to paint again until the Duchess was returned to good graces. When this was accomplished, he took off for the North in a coach. During the trip, in a very lonely place called *Destina Terros*, there was an accident with the coach, and Goya jumped out to light a fire so he could straighten a bent axle. He became overheated and caught what appears to have been an upper respiratory infection resulting in either pneumonia, meningitis, or both. He developed a tremendously high fever and struggled, apparently under a shadow



Figure 3. *El Quitasol*, Goya.

of death, for several days. When he recovered, he was totally deaf. The sudden onset, in the middle of his career, had a devastating effect. There is not much doubt that, in spite of the fact both Goya and the Duchess were now invited to return to Madrid, the affair cooled, perhaps largely due to his complete deafness.

Goya adopted a more cynical outlook in his work. He began the "Tauromachy" paintings (Fig. 4) and drew a series known as "Los Capriceos," which are cynical comments on life. He continued with his portraiture, although he began to deal more in flat, darkened colors than in pastels. He seems to have been caught up in emphasizing the physical defects of his subjects.

Eventually Goya retired to the suburbs north of Madrid, to the "house of the deaf man," where he lived for about ten years. He hired a housekeeper with whom he communicated only through sign language. She had a very malignant personality, and Goya became a recluse. When he moved to Bordeaux some ten years later, and left the "house of the deaf man," his "black paintings" (Fig. 5) were found on the walls, particularly in the dining room. He lived to



Figure 4. *Escena De Toros*, Goya.



Figure 5. *Saturno*, Goya.

the age of eighty-two. His last painting, "The Maid of Bordeaux," although a portrait, is somewhat flat, dark, and almost monochromatic.

A third personal experience involved my own emotional reaction as much as the patient's. Not long ago we saw in our office a patient whose hearing loss was such that an operation might restore her hearing to a level where she could comfortably benefit from amplification. The procedure was recommended to her and performed. When she was seen in the office, postoperatively, she was thrilled with her surgical result. She stated she was now able to hear people talking in the next room. She could use the telephone easily. She could hear the doorbell; she felt her hearing had been miraculously restored to normal. A hearing test done in the office suggested only the anticipated postoperative recovery but unfortunately was ignored.

As her physician, I had become involved in her emotional reaction through a transference of happiness and elation. I went home that evening absolutely convinced I had been able to help this lady out of all proportion. Two days later, while driving on the expressway with her son-in-law, she began to

hear voices in the back seat, opened the door, and jumped out. Fortunately, her son-in-law had noted her agitated behavior, her fidgeting with the door handle, and moved to the side of the expressway. This lady was a paranoid-schizophrenic, troubled with auditory hallucinations. Although I should have been warned by her effusive description of her ability to hear. I was too anxious for a happy result to understand what was really taking place. There are two morals here: first, beware of results that are not consistent with scientific reality; and, of course, realize our patients may have psychological problems not related to ENT disease.

The thesis regarding Oscar Wilde is difficult to develop because it is not easy to cull his hearing problem from the rest of his difficulties. His story is one of contrasts more striking than those of Goya or Beethoven.

Oscar Wilde (Fig. 6) was the son of a famous otolaryngologist, yet he died of otic meningitis. He was once a "lord of language," yet he did not write or lecture after he left prison. He began writing of youth and idealism, yet he ended with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the *De Profundis*. In 1894 he was living an apparently satisfactory bisexual life, but by 1895 he had become the world's most renowned homosexual. Although he inherited much of his father's land and fortune, he died as he had lived, beyond his means.

Those who know his life will know his problems included not only cigarette smoking, alcohol, and absinthe (which contains an hallucinogen similar to THC), but also bisexuality, libertinism, and prolonged imprisonment. This prison experience was such a devastating emotional event that the progressive hearing loss that resulted from chronic otitis media cannot be isolated as a specific factor in the changes in his personality.

To understand Wilde, it is first necessary to know his parents. His father was an ophthalmologist and otolaryngologist of extreme fame. He was often referred to as the most famous surgeon of Ireland. It is from his notes about Oscar's ear infections we glean much of the story of this problem. Sir William Wilde established the original Eye and Ear Hospital in Dublin. He was equally successful in managing his estates in Ireland, as he was able to reclaim the land, relocate the peasants, and create a profitable organization. Dr. Wilde was also a renowned archaeologist and antiquarian. For his work in archaeology, he received a knighthood. He founded the *Dublin Quarterly Journal of Science*, and it was he, Oscar's father, who largely dominated the household.

Yet Lady Wilde was famous in her own right: she was the poet "Esperanza." Oscar's mother was also an Irish nationalist and an early feminist. She is probably the source of Oscar's artistic talents and literary inclinations.

Oscar Wilde was born in 1854. One of his life-



Figure 6. Oscar Wilde.

long problems was his professed adoration of youth. There is no doubt that, as he drew nearer to old age, he constantly gave the time of his birth as some years later than the truth. In fact, his credibility at his own trial was perhaps never re-established after he lied about his age by two years.

Oscar was educated at home until he was eleven, both by his parents and by other exceptional tutors. His father lived high and his mother was fond of entertaining literary people and many Bohemian artists. Oscar gave early proof of great cleverness. When he was nine, Lady Wilde said to a caller, "Willie [his older brother] is all right, but Oscar is wonderful. He can do anything."

At Trinity College, in Dublin, Oscar became what might be considered a fop. He wore his top hat constantly and was extremely well dressed. He left his first school with a scholarship and a gold medal and proceeded to Oxford. In *De Profundis* he wrote, "I want to get to the point where I shall be able to say, quite simply and with affection, that the two great turning points in my life were when my father sent me to Oxford, and when society sent me to prison." At Oxford he listened to the lectures of John Ruskin at a time when Ruskin had turned his mind toward aesthetics. There is a story related to Oscar Wilde's

experiences at Oxford College which may have set the pattern for his life. He took an expensive apartment with leaded glass windows overlooking the river. He furnished this with antiques, including a set of cobalt blue dishes, and gave parties and invited only the aesthetic people he liked. He excelled academically and won a prize for English verse. He was first in his class, with a reputation for scholarship and literary ability. However, along with this cleverness, came a very biting, bitter tongue. He used it with great dexterity, particularly on some of his friends. One often heard the expression that Oscar Wilde had no enemies but was intensely disliked by his friends.

After graduating from Oxford, it became necessary, even for Oscar Wilde, to earn a living. He elected to do so by the innovative decision to give a series of lectures in America. It was his destiny to bring the matter of aesthetics to the American people. Thus, in the 1880s, when the West was opening, he gave lectures on the aesthetic movement in England, on the English Renaissance, the decorative arts, dress, the house beautiful, and so on. His clothing included velvet knickers, and his hair was long. All of this was somewhat out of keeping with the mood of the American male at this time; on the other hand, his talks were extremely attractive to the women. His speeches were highly advertised, and they paid him well. His eccentricities were described in the newspapers and he became the most popular matinee attraction. He was quoted as having said, "I am not exactly pleased with the Atlantic, it is not so majestic as I had expected," and, "I was disappointed with Niagara. Most people must be disappointed with Niagara. Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of that stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments of American married life." He went briefly to Paris, but when he ran out of money he returned to England to begin a lecture tour, talking to the English about America. He described a sign in Leadville which reads, "Please do not shoot the piano player, he is doing his best." He referred to this as "the aesthetic application of the revolver as an art critic."

Wilde eventually married a very pretty young heiress, Miss Constance Lloyd, in 1884. There are several written indications they were very happy together until immediately prior to his going to jail. Afterwards, Constance defied her family in an attempt at a reconciliation. They had two sons, Vyvian and Clarence. In July of 1890, Oscar wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and though the moral of this story is quite clear—that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly—he was often called upon to defend both the novel and his reasons for writing it.

Oscar was riding high in the early 1890s: *Dorian Gray* was selling especially well, three plays were showing in London simultaneously and one in New York, and both publishers and producers were advancing him funds on the promises of future work. He wrote:

The gods had given me almost everything. I had

genius, a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy and philosophy an art; I altered the minds of men and the colours of things; there was nothing I said or did that did not make people wonder...drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful...I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me: I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.

Typical of his behavior was his wish to wipe out the accusations of homosexual advances which were directed against him. He began a court suit for libel against the Marquis of Queensbury, but he himself was ultimately convicted by countersuit. Perhaps he was convicted as much by public outcry as by actual evidence. He was sentenced to two years' hard labor at Reading Gaol, during which time he wrote the *De Profundis*. This is a series of letters which included "The Ballad of Reading Gaol."

The ultimate contrast is that less than two years after the previous quotation, and in reaction to his mother's death, Oscar wrote:

No one knew how deeply I loved and honored her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. She and my father bequeathed to me a name that they had made noble and honored, not merely in Literature, Art, Archeology, and Science, but in the public history of my own country in its evolution as a nation. I had made it a low by-word among low people. I had dragged it through the very mire. I had given it to brutes that they might turn it into a synonym for folly. What I suffered then, and still suffer is not for pen to write or paper to record.

Oscar never wrote after he left prison. Several faltering attempts came to naught. In 1898, he wrote, "My writing has gone to bits, like my character. I am simply a self-conscious nerve in pain."

At the time Wilde was a young man, both cigarette smoking and alcohol were believed to be useful medical treatments for infection. Alcohol was thought to have *in vivo* antiseptic effects. You will perhaps recall that Professor Toynbee died by inhaling a mixture of chloroform and prussic acid. He attempted a Valsalva exercise in an effort to blow these antiseptics into his middle ear.

In addition to the constant use of both tobacco and alcohol, Wilde had begun to experiment with absinthe and its hallucinogenic effects. This perhaps led to personality changes, further dependence, jail, injury, and his death in 1900, at the age of forty-six. Wilde's story is a fairly modern one.

While researching this paper I found at least one new book has appeared each year since his death, either chronicling the life of or attempting to explain Oscar Wilde. His work is timeless. The plays are still produced regularly, and as movies and television reruns can be seen weekly. Vincent Price has also toured for several years with a one-man show about Oscar Wilde. Ultimately Oscar Wilde's fame returned. From his pauper's grave he was entombed in P re LaChaise cemetery with a proper headstone.

The conclusion of such a treatise is apparent. The close relationship between the emotions and creative ability is real. Careful study is still needed, but it seems potential ability to direct the emotional development in such circumstances must exist. Beethoven rose above his handicap and created strong, uplifting work almost until the end of his life.

Francisco Goya, however, became cynical, unsettled, and spent many years as a recluse, creating little. If one agrees that Oscar Wilde's personality was also affected by his ear condition, we cannot help but wish for complete knowledge of the emotional and creative relationships to physical handicaps.

DATA BANK

Wegener's granulomatosis, an uncommon, possibly autoimmune disorder characterized by necrotizing granulomas and vasculitis, most often of the lower and upper respiratory passages and kidneys, may rarely manifest itself initially with otorrhea, serous effusion, and decreased hearing. Ultimate involvement of the ear occurs in up to 30 percent of patients with this disorder. Surgery is contraindicated. Treatment is with cytotoxic chemotherapy.

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About 1855, Rinne described the test that bears his name. As late as 1900, 26 years before the first use of a bone conduction audiometer, all but one member of the German Otological Society held that the Rinne test was of no clinical significance.

DATA BANK

Like the penis, scrotum, and eyelids, the auricle of the ear has no fat.