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The Speaking Face of Things and the Bride of Quietness

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THIS ESSAY is in honor of my favorite person, friend, and speaking face, John Beer, whose lectures, essays, books, reviews, and friendship I have enjoyed for thirty-eight years, the number of years that he has allowed me to include him as a distinguished, kind, generous, and forbearing advisor to *The Wordsworth Circle*. My essay was inspired by a lecture John gave at the Wordsworth Summer conference in 1978, a great year in all our lives, and published the following winter in *The Wordsworth Circle* as “Wordsworth and the Face of Things” (IX [1979] 17-29). In this essay, John explored the many ways that Wordsworth used the term “face,” its literary antecedents, the transcendent, the “expressive and changing mask” of nature, its divine implications and the human faces, the faces of life, which Wordsworth also treasured, as John Beer has helped us all to do. His essay is a model of grace and learning, still timely and provocative, and, like John himself, forever new and fair. It will be republished in *TWC XXXVII* (Summer, 2006).

In this essay, I want to consider “things,” not faces, for we live in an age of things, so many, so often, and so diverse, from *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (1988), to M. H. Abrams, *Doing Things with Texts* (1991), Foucault’s *Order of Things* (1994), even the inevitable “Thing Theory” in *Things*, edited by Bill Brown (2001) and a whole series of books called *A Hundred Things You Should Know About this or that* (2004), bodies, insects, flowers, diseases, boats, and in the news this very summer, two of the most powerful officials in the world, George Bush and Tony Blair, discussing this trade “thingy,” the Iraq “thingy,” the coziness of the term disguising the deadliness of the subject. In Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s time, things also prevailed, the whole world “a giant heap of little things,” as Coleridge once complained, and a University Chair, which some may still aspire to, called “The Universal Professor of Things in General” vacated by the tormented Teufelsdröck in *Sartor Resartus*.

Historically, the word “thing” is rare: evolving from oral to written, it grew by accretion, accumulating meanings, from the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian *Thing* as a legislative event, meeting, or the place, the *Thing*-field, -hill or -hall, where they happen, the laws that were proposed, the *Thing*-days when they happened, and a *Thing*-er, the person who used the ritual objects, things, instead of words, like those strange creatures in *Gulliver’s Travels* who carry their vocabularies on their backs. “Doing your own thing,” which sounds like a hippie concept actually shares in this Anglo-Saxon history, revived briefly in the 18th century, meaning practicing your occupation—Samuel Johnson was just doing his thing. Later, a thing could be an idea or worse, an obsession, possession, a behavior, or a generalization of all of them such as “All best things are thus confused to ill” (*Prometheus Unbound*), Shelley referring to such abstractions as goodness, love, wisdom, and power, but equally appropriate for academic life in general. Wordsworth used the word often in weighty, often exclusive, and suggestive ways: Things can be living objects, the “life of

things,” the “light of things,” “rolls through all things,” “all thinking things,” but it could also refer to the very opposite, inanimate objects without life or consciousness the “mute insensate things” of *Three Years She Grew*, “she seemed a thing that could not feel the touch of earthly years,” or the supernatural, the “host/Of shadowy things” that in the “mystery of words... do work their changes” (V 619-23), and with negative connotations, the “wretched thing forlorn” in “The Thorn,” a “guilty thing surprised” (*Intimations Ode*), or the whole historic panorama, the “present face of things” in the sonnet “October, 1803.” For Coleridge, “things,” such as “all things both great and small,” referred to the sum of creation, but also, as it was for Mary Shelley, “thing” referred to the monstrous, the “slimy things” of the Ancient Mariner, and Frankenstein’s unlovable creation.

A specimen of an early language that survives in contemporary oral communities, the word “thing” is literally a verbal fossil, like much of the language of “low and rustic life” that Wordsworth wanted to imitate. “Thing” is one among those “words which speak of no-thing more than what we are” or those “words which are things” that Byron pined for (*Childe Harold*, III, 1059-1061, as explained by Richard Turley in *The Politics of Language in Romantic Literature* [2002]). At the intersection of the oral and the written, of speaking and reading, words actually become *things* when they are written, collections of letters instead of sounds, shapes, markings, on stone, parchment, requiring tools and manual labor, as Walter Ong explained in *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982). With printing, words become property, Ong observed, duplicated, owned, licensed, even stolen, but also diversify, generate new and subtler variations. In print, without a speaker to gesture or explain, such collective and allusive words as “meat” and “drink” require precise referents: “meat,” for example, which once referred to all food becomes the specific pork chops, bananas, or toast, and “drink” becomes water, milk, whisky, depending on the context.

The word “thing,” retains its oral meanings, acquiring in time and through print more referents, referring to more “things.” Among words, then, it is the great shape-shifter, the trickster, even, if you use it well, the one word you wish you owned stock in so popular and perennial it is. As I have illustrated, “thing” can have two opposite meanings at the same time, the animate and inanimate, the concrete possessions and the most abstract qualities, a quantum word with double meanings that could cancel each other—though, despite potential misunderstanding such fuzzy words generate, even without context, intonation, modifiers, no wars have been fought or even elections lost from misunderstanding what a speaker means by “things.” As a word, it is in brief a glory, which as Humpty Dumpty said in *Through the Looking-Glass*, means whatever we want it to mean.

In the poems of Somerset, *The Ruined Cottage*, *Salisbury Plain*, *The Borderers*, some *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge’s conversation poems, *Kubla Khan*, the *Ancient Mariner*, generic words like “face” and “things”, and their multiple referents represent the surviving oral culture that Wordsworth and Coleridge encountered in Somerset and cultivated as a literary voice—in turn, honoring

and perpetuating it. This orality with its universal patterns, functions, and predictability, occurs in several pre-literate states, such as childhood with which we are all familiar, oral cultures without literacy, adult illiterate communities, and, finally, as a legitimate and periodic resource to literate people in technological societies when writing is threatened or exploited, in times of crisis or transition (or, as Paul Cheshire pointed out, at literary conferences). For example, in "Fears in Solitude," Coleridge accuses the "fearless phrasemen" of using abstractions to cover the horrors of war, and prays that an "all-avenging Providence" will "make us know/ The meaning of our words..." (108-125). Similarly, oral communication becomes the alternative when print is censored and publishing is dangerous, as in the 1790s and, again, in the 60s, and even now in this new age of terror.

Along with the political crisis of the 1790s, geographically and linguistically, Somerset was an ideal place to encounter the oral community: transitional, a liminal space, a place of passage, historically from the ancient Celtic invasions to the Romans, Danes, Christian monks, religious pilgrims, sailors, merchants, pirates, smugglers, and the dreaded French, a place of departure and a refuge for the marginal, the unaffiliated, émigrés, lepers, criminals, gypsies, even French nuns in Cannington, tourists and vacationers such as Wordsworth, Jane Austen, Coleridge, and now summer festivals and literary conferences. While islands and isolated valleys such as Grasmere retain their language and lore, oral culture travels like seeds, and flourishes in permeable places such as Somerset, where the alien are assimilated, and the language, like the population, is also transitional, aggregative, eclectic.

Though one never knows when one is in transition, as if one could ever be out of it, retrospectively, for the poets, it was a transitional time, another of those liminal spaces of which they had experienced so many, another time of passage and indecision, with its reversions, recursions, recollections, and anticipations. Wordsworth was recovering from France, his despair over the revolution, losing Annette and Caroline, and finding Dorothy, though essentially still homeless and dependent. Two years at Racedown in Dorset, near Lyme Regis with young Basil Montague had awakened their sense of their own childhood. And Coleridge was a new father, with new friends, a new life, still sorting through the immense political and religious confusion that we have studied so often and so long..

Beyond their personal transition, Wordsworth and Coleridge were in the middle of a long transition in the history of language, the transition between two oralities, as Walter Ong called them, the original oral one that they captured, the language of conversation, and a new one, they could not yet imagine: the human voice mechanically preserved, extended and reproduced in telephones, recordings, and radios. While writing and then printing permitted duplication, reproduction, and dissemination, the human voice and each utterance was still unique. Representations of oral expression in writing were as misleading, vague, and ineffectual as musical scores are to music. Dramatists and ballad collectors, any writer who attempted dialogue, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Bishop Percy and Robert Burns, invented a new

language, neither literary nor oral, a *bricolage* to adapt a term from Claude Lévi-Strauss, a tool meant for something else, writing used to represent oral expression. For example, here is an anecdote from Ruth Tongue, the primary informant of Somerset lore: “Tom have gone to work foreign in Hereford to larn to be a carpenteer... Well, one time he and Carpenter was mending church spire. He calls up to Tom, “Don’t ‘e go to climb all down the long ladder.” “Oh, say Tom, “I be halfways down it ‘ready.” “Oh”, say Carpenter, “well, I’ve took he away.”’ Like all representations of dialect, however unique the community, in transcription it becomes as standardized as conventional writing, whether it represents the impenetrable Burns, an American Indian, a European gypsy, or a native of Somerset. The verb tenses are lost, the pronouns confused, the words misspelled, ellipses everywhere, even the “intensifying” copulative, which is a distinction of Southern Black speech. As a *bricolage*, like all representations of oral expression, certainly as a representation of Somerset speech, it is a forgery, an oral version of Chatterton’s Old English. Still, the oral expression of Somerset inspired Wordsworth and Coleridge to create their own language of conversation, to capture the way men and women really express themselves, purified of the dialect that other writers had failed to translate into print, and to invent the most successful *bricolage* in the history of oral transcription.

Until the invention of recording, recreating an oral culture was a great challenge to literate individuals, since literacy itself alters the very wiring of the brain, creates an irreversible shift in consciousness, as Ong explains, from a communal external oral exchange to the solitary, internal, and subjective life of both writer and reader: perception and understanding shifts from auditory and social experience requiring the presence of a speaker, to a visual experience, privately and silently reading not only words, but stars, weather, pictures, scenery. This divided allegiance between “the mighty world of eye and ear” accounts for the mystery in that famous phrase in *Tintern Abbey*, “not as is the landscape to a blind man’s eye,” which fascinated, among others, the late Richard Wordsworth, an actor who spent his life with *bricolage*, with scripts representing the oral behavior he impersonated. For the blind man, all experience is conveyed in sound, real sound. The poet, however, sees the landscape, as if it were a literary work, projects metaphoric music on it, “the still sad music of humanity,” Keats’s “unheard melodies,” “ditties of no tone” that only the poet hears. Among literate people, sight overcomes sound, as reading overcomes listening, as the mighty world of eye overcomes the world of ear.

Wherever the oral and written cultures co-exist or compete, such subtle puzzles are common—while speech is authentic, writing has authority. For example, writing first appears in the Old Testament in the tablets Moses received from God, but in what language? Raised in Egypt, if they read at all, was it in hieroglyphics? Or if no one could read, how did they make sense of them and why did God write them down? Or, back in the 1790s, Blake’s Introduction to the *Songs of Innocence*, the Piper, following the advice of an angel, takes a “rural pen” and “stained the water clear” to write his songs,

communicate them abroad so that “every child may joy to hear,” not read. If the children can’t write or read, why bother to write them down at all?

In the Conversation poems, Wordsworth and Coleridge created a fiction of orality even as they were *writing*, addressing a living but unresponsive and silent auditor: Dorothy in *Tintern Abbey*, the baby in *Frost at Midnight*, Sarah in the *Aeolian Harp*, and so on. The silence of the auditor, according to Ong at least, occurs because authors, writing alone, do not require responses, because writing and reading as well have interiorized the verbal experience, which became such a habit to Coleridge, as Tim Fulford remarked in *Coleridge’s Figurative Language* (1991), that in his later years, his conversations were monologues (p.130). So, while Coleridge and Wordsworth were interested in the language of conversation, conversed endlessly themselves according to their own records, and wrote poems of conversation, there is little if any evidence of an auditor and the prevailing state was silence, the absence of external sound.

Until the second orality, when technology extended and preserved sound, the *human* condition was silence, a “wide quietness,” as Keats called it. The Ancient Mariner’s “strange powers of speech” are exactly that, “strange,” unusual and crazy; he talks too much, too slowly, or doesn’t say enough and doesn’t understand the meaning of his own words. For all Coleridge’s legendary talking, also too much, too slowly, listening little, and maybe not understanding himself as well, in his poetry silence reigns, even among things that could not make noise at all: the quiet moon, sea, frost, icicles, always quiet, and the oxymoronic and ultimate, “Silence sank like music on my heart” or in *The Aeolian Harp*, the “stilly murmur of the distant sea/ Tells us of silence.”

Michael O’Neill traces the sublime experiences that are “wholly incommunicable by words,” in “Romantic Expressions of the Inexpressible” (*TWC*, XXXI [2000] 13-20), but I believe that for both Wordsworth and Coleridge, silence is a constant presence, the very ground of being, the “Eternal Silence,” as Wordsworth calls it in the Intimations Ode to which our “noisy years seem moments.” For Wordsworth, silence is a power, for good or bad: the unresponsive other in the conversation poems, the unlearned language that isolates him in Germany, his obstacle as a poet. Wordsworth’s poetry, even after Somerset, is populated by silent or inarticulate people, Margaret’s “silent suffering,” the silence of the Pedlar, the Idiot Boy, the Leech Gatherer whose voice is never heard, and the inscrutable Solitary Reaper, the Old Sea Captain in “The Thorn” who declares repeatedly the sad inadequacy of speech, “I do not know, I cannot say.”

On the other hand, if people are silent, nature speaks, and, turning to *The Prelude*, things speak, a “mighty sum/ Of things forever speaking,” or sings, “One song... and it was audible,” (II 428-29). Waters roar, as do winds, sometimes with a “strange utterance” to the boy, Wordsworth, hanging from a perilous ledge, and, later, as he reports at Simplon pass, inanimate “rocks muttered close upon our ears,” “Black drizzling crags... spake by the wayside/ As if a voice were in them,” and everyone’s favorite, the curious supernatural naturalism of “the ghostly language of the ancient earth” (1805 II 324-30).

The language that fails human beings is also displaced onto inanimate objects, the Brides of Quietness, “the speaking face of things,” wind-blasted trees, deserted huts, the fragment of a wooden bowl express the “tragic facts,” as Wordsworth called them, “Of rural history” (*Two Part Prelude*, I, 279-87). The ventriloquist is nature, to reverse the title of Edward Bostetter’s controversial *The Romantic Ventriloquists* (1963); the vehicles, literally media, are the storytellers who, like Wordsworth, like the narrator of “Simon Lee,” see “a tale in everything,” or like the Pedlar in *The Excursion* whose mind, nourished by “many a legend, peopling the dark woods,” had “small need of books.”

In the rich material culture of Somerset, a long succession of both natural and human histories is preserved and expressed in such expressive objects and things: Mary Annon’s fossils and glacial debris, the iron age caves, remains from Celts and Danes who invaded from the North, the Romans from the South, Druids and early Christian monks, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, German, coins and bones, rocks and ruins, barrows, standing stones, hill figures, wells, walls, ornaments and tools. For example, (and here I am grateful to Tom Mayberry and to Ken Johnston who animated footnotes by walking in Wordsworth’s footsteps), Culbone, where Coleridge sought refuge in a lone farm house to complete *Osorio*, held layers of remains from the iron age to a leper colony, charcoal burners, East Indian exiles, crazed poets like Coleridge and now a new age colony where good witches invoke the spirits of the past. Or Glastonbury, a whole collage of historical, legendary, and spiritual things, another iron-age survivor, and now a spiritual capital, with barrows and ley lines from Romans and ancient Celts, King Arthur buried on the reputed Island of Avalon and the holy grail in the Chalice Well, the entrance to the Celtic underworld from the Tor on the hill, legitimate Christian churches function along with Goddess cults worshipping the energies emitted by a female figure they see in the undulations of the landscape, home to The International School of Vibration Therapy, a center for sound therapy using Tibetan crystal bells and Digeridoos and the annual rock festival—rock music not geology. Even Cannington has a multi-layered history from the iron age to our golden age when we gather like spies in the chapel.

Along with the heroic, ancient and authentic material remains, Somerset offers a third world of history, lost and disconnected but still speaking things, neither true nor false, things that have no place else to be, such as nuclear cooling towers, vandalized telephone booths waiting for tales to accrue, or caves and theme parks like Wooky Hole, its dragon/dinosaur restorations, witches, models of King Kong, and teddy bear collection—recently savaged by a crazed German Doberman who left all of them, even Mabel, the beloved Steiff once owned by Elvis Presley, in a heap of glass eyes, amber fur, and stuffing (*New York Times*, “World News,” August 4, 2006). Such remains, either contrived or accidental, inspire the local stories, haunted places, and oral monuments as the Ruined Cottage or Walford’s Gibbet, where Tom Walford, a poor charcoal burner, was hanged in 1789 for murdering the simple, slovenly mother of his two children, and confessing before his death to the woman he had really loved (David Worthy, *A Quantock Tragedy* [1998], 12). After hearing

the tale from Tom Poole, Wordsworth turned it into the “Somersetshire Tragedy,” which was destroyed in 1931 by Gordon Wordsworth who feared it would tarnish Wordsworth’s reputation (Kenneth Johnston, *The Hidden Wordsworth* [1998], 507-510). Similar tales of poverty, domestic violence, mad mothers, impulsive crimes, orphaned children, unrequited love, illusions won and lost, of survival on the edge, the displaced, abandoned, and wanderers, suffuse the Somerset poems, the *Lyrical Ballads*, *Salisbury Plain*, *The Borderers*, and others. The poems reflect not only Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s personal experience, what they did and what they feared, the gothic and pastoral literary tradition, but also they are an authentic expression of the indigenous Somerset culture.

Somerset tales were mostly preserved by someone with the unlikely name of Ruth Tongue (*Somerset Folklore* [London: Folklore Society, 1965]) and, for comparison, *Forgotten Folktales of the English Counties*, collected by Tongue, edited by Katherine Briggs (1970) and the recent collection, useful, again for context and comparison, edited by Jennifer Westwood and Jacqueline Simpson, *The Lore of the Land: A Guide to England’s Legends, from Spring-Heeled Jack to the Witches of Warboys* (2006). Like most folklore, the tales of Somerset were and still are transmitted by travelers, soldiers, priests, merchants, criminals, story tellers, and are built on a migratory sub-text. But most tales from other places end in domestication, refuge, shelter, a cave, a cottage, a castle, a hearth where tales can be told and a community listens, where hospitality is celebrated and honored. These Somerset tales, however, are un-domesticated, embody endless journeys and lost people. They contain none of the common animal or supernatural helpers, magical cures, or treasure that does not cause pain and death. There are seldom resolutions, happy endings, indeed often no endings at all—of which the Ancient Mariner is an example. Typically, the tales offer a record of undeserved affliction, injustice, victimization, malevolent nature-beings against whose curses there are no antidotes, no supernatural guardians or magical protectors. In folklore, at least, Somerset is among the “worlds unrealized,” and human beings the “guilty things surprised”.

Whatever its origins, this lore survives because it reflects a shared individual and collective human history of fear, invasion, vulnerability, that the frequently conquered and permeable community of Somerset experienced and which is memorialized in the “speaking face of things.” The dark and unredeeming popular lore of Somerset is expressed in the naive superstitions, the pervasive fear which afflicts nearly everyone in *Lyrical Ballads* from the speaker in *Strange Fits of Passion* watching the moon descend, to Christabel, and the haunted boy in *Tintern Abbey* fleeing from what he dreads.

Among the most common motifs are the malignant nature spirits, populating the area from Bath to Dorset: peskies, giants, spunkies, brownies, trolls, ugly and gnarled shape-shifting spriggans, earth creatures, transformed and avenging animals (such as the Albatross), spectral hunts with phantom dogs and bears hunting human prey, and human beings turned to stone or trees, the Gally Beggar of Nether Stowey, the Bull Beggar of Creech Hill, all laughing maniacally as they lead unsuspecting travelers into forests and ravines.

Ghosts of dead babies, misplaced, abandoned, unbaptized, or sacrificial babies become spunkies, the whil'os the whisps, the lights on the hills that lure wanderers astray, their horses off cliffs (the only defense: turn your coat inside out, if you are lucky enough to be wearing a coat and know what to do when need it). Wordsworth alludes to many of such infantile hauntings: the mysterious grave in "The Thorn," "Martha Ray," the Lucy Poems, "We are Seven," "The Danish Boy," "The Idiot Boy," crazed and abandoned Ruth, the dead babies in "The Ruined Cottage." This poetic slaughter of infants, according to some, reflect Wordsworth's bad conscience over Annette and Caroline, or, as Josephine McDonagh claims in *Child Murder in British Culture, 1720-1900* (2003), "a characteristically English response to the politically threatening idea of the sexually dependent woman,"(71), or even the specter of Malthus's fear of over-population. Mostly, however, I think this preoccupation reflects the spirit of the place, of Somerset, the beliefs and superstitions that it generates and Wordsworth could not avoid.

Shape-shifters are commonplace, the hares, cats, mice, black dogs, trees. everything easily something else, a demon, ghost, witch, or devil, phantom coaches and hearses, inexplicable lights predicting death within the year, every plant an enchanted witch, her victim, or an omen of disaster. Even Dorothy in her Alfoxden journals, along with meticulous jottings about the weather, under the spell of Somerset where she walked often alone at night to gather wood becoming herself part of the local lore, commenting on trees as "stiff and erect and like black skeletons," ivy "twisting round the oaks like bristled serpents," the "strange uncouth howling" of a dog. These are the speaking faces of supernatural things, the ones the natives heard and told to John Collinson, who described them in the *History and Antiquities of Somerset* (1791), the whistling witch of Minehead whose imitation of the wind lured ships to wreck themselves along the coast, maniacal laughter, and the "screaming skulls" that rise up to haunt not just their tormentors but anyone passing by, a ghostly racket to rival the opening of *Christabel*. The Somerset tales include words which are in fact things, dangerous things, curses, omens, spells, repetitions, words that turn into fiery toads and bite or devour people—an apt metaphor for language itself in the censored world of the 1790s.

The abundant and visible fossils of Somerset underlie the tales of cannibal giants in old Stowey or the recurrent Quantock dragons from Roman, Norman, and Celtic tales of successful invasions, villages overcome, natives slaughtered, battles lost, similar tales updated with every war and always ending with beasts devouring the defeated soldiers. These fossil/dragon bones tell a human history, relics that express the experience of the oral community, the perspective of the casualties, the un-heroic and unacknowledged dead, the anonymous victims who fought wars they did not understand, lost their lives and battles. But they owned the stories and shaped them to memorialize their own experiences. Such oral narratives, created and preserved by the people who lived them, are always the counter-culture, the very opposite to the heroic Arthurian legends which preserve, however legendary, the official stories of patriotism, victories, heroism.

The only agreeable tales involve the healing wells, although even they have gruesome dimension. The well in Watchet for example became sacred after St. Decumen who, having sailed on a raft from Wales with his cow, was beheaded by a native, who didn't like him (nothing here about martyrs and miracles, just bad nature). The well became holy and therapeutic after Decumen washed his head in it and settled it back on again. Surrounded by these things forever speaking, survivals of primitive oral culture and the things that inspired it, Wordsworth and Coleridge were drawn into the gruesome folk history of Somerset, which I now believe provided much of the substance to the Somerset poems and which the poems in turn preserve and express.

In 1849, the year before he died, Wordsworth wrote a sonnet objecting to illustrated books, especially when the illustrations substitute for texts

Discourse was deemed Man's noblest attribute,
 And written words the glory of his hand;
 Then followed Printing with enlarged command
 For thought—dominion vast and absolute
 For spreading truth, and making love expand.
 Now prose and verse sunk into disrepute
 Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit
 The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
 A backward movement surely have we here,
 From manhood—back to childhood; for the age
 Back towards caverned life's first rude career.
 Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!
 Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
 Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!

Like civilization itself, like each individual human being, so Wordsworth had evolved into a totally literate and literary human being. But, given the value judgment, perhaps evolve isn't the right word, for this heightened state of literacy carried a penalty: the loss of the oral consciousness, of the capacity to think in the oral tradition, to see "the landscape with a blind man's eye," one that Wordsworth himself had taught others to recognize. Ironically, nearly blind himself, perhaps in the best position of his life to savor and practice the oral tradition, Wordsworth dismisses it as primitive, "A backward movement... to childhood," "towards caverned life's first rude career."

The speaking face of things he once could hear has been obscured by the writing hands of authors, one of which he has become, by literacy, publishing, and the tyranny of eyes to which he once objected.