

ON DEAF EARS

Joseph Grigely on Sanford Friedman's *Conversations with Beethoven*

Conversations with Beethoven, by Sanford Friedman.
New York: New York Review Books, 2014. 304 pages.

THERE'S AN IRONIC MOMENT in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* when the solipsistic Holden has a scheme for eliminating from his life the bother of people and conversations. It occurs at the end of the novel, just before Holden meets up with his kid sister, Phoebe, to say good-bye. He's fed up with phonies, and he's fed up with everyone and everything. So he sits on a park bench and concocts this plan to get away: He'll go down to the Holland Tunnel and hitchhike far out West where it's sunny and where nobody knows him. He figures he'll get a job at a gas station. And then this is what he says he'll do:

I thought what I'd do was, I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through with having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone.¹

It's a great plan, and it might have worked except for one pesky detail: People love to write. If forty-eight years of being deaf has taught me anything, it's that people will write on any scrap of paper in order to be heard: They'll write on envelopes and Post-its; they'll write in notebooks and book margins, on newspapers and dollar bills; they'll even write with Magic Markers on advertising panels outside the Grand Central Oyster Bar. And they'll write with unmitigated fervor in blank notebooks dedicated to the purpose, as Beethoven discovered—and whose collected conversations, reimagined, retranscribed, and edited into a narrative about the last year of his life, are the basis for Sanford Friedman's brilliant posthumous novel, *Conversations with Beethoven*.

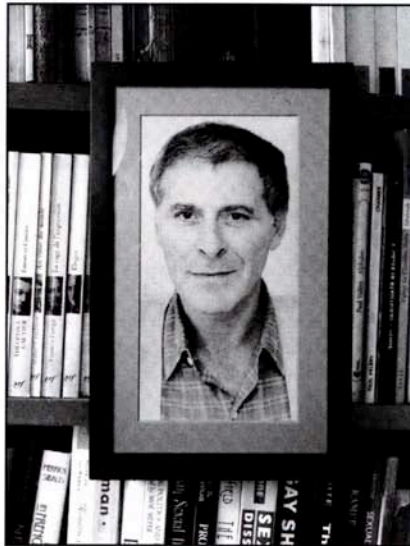
ON JUNE 1, 1801, when Beethoven was thirty years old, he wrote in a letter to his friend Karl Amenda:

How often I wish that you were with me, for your Beethoven lives most unhappily, in discord with nature and the Creator. . . . You must be told the finest part of me, my hearing, has greatly deteriorated. Already then, at the time you were still with me, I felt traces of this and kept quiet about it: now it has grown progressively worse. Whether it can ever be cured, remains to be seen. They say that it is occasioned by the condition of my bowels: but as far as these are concerned, I have

almost entirely recovered. Whether my hearing too, will improve—I sincerely hope so, but it is unlikely: illnesses of this kind are the most incurable.²

It was a prescient diagnosis: For the next twenty-six years, Beethoven's hearing got progressively worse. For the last nine years of his life, starting in February 1818, most of his conversations were conducted on paper, usually in the form of bound octavo commonplace

Portrait of Sanford Friedman in Richard Howard's library, New York.
Photo: David Alexander.



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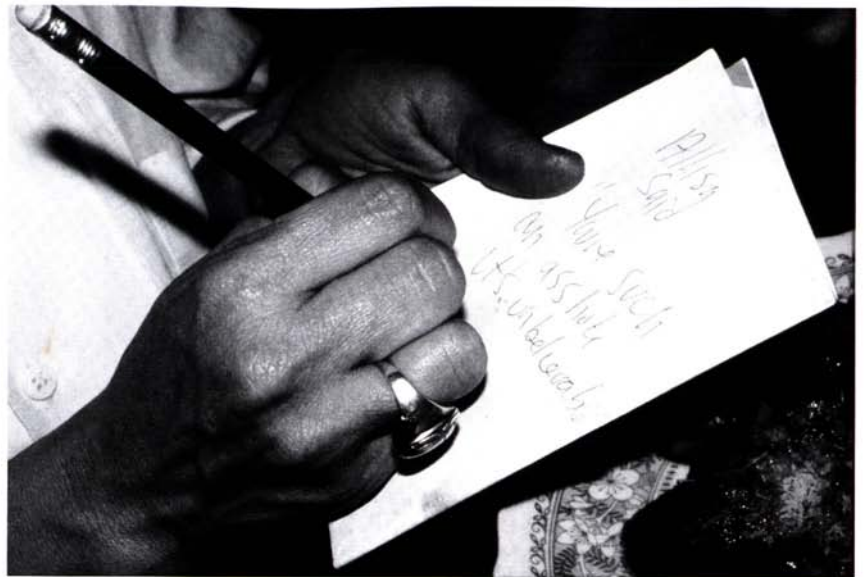
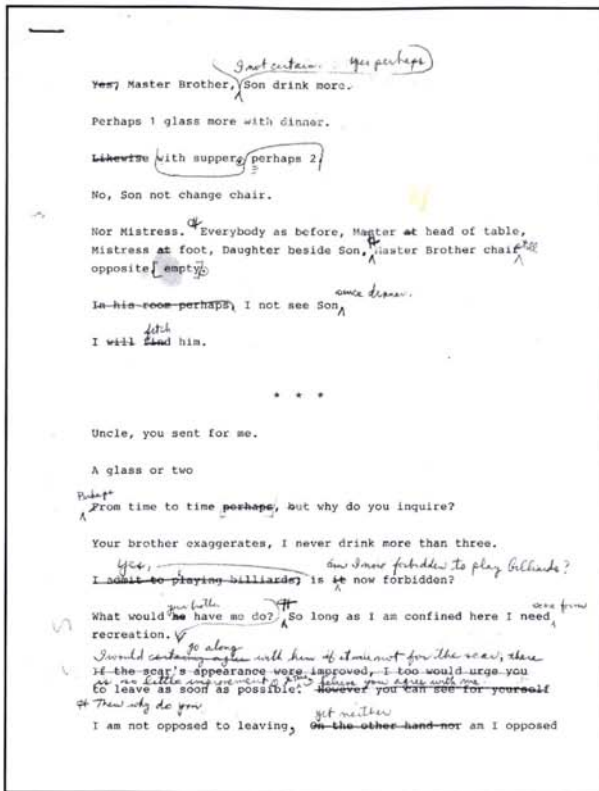
books roughly eight inches high and five inches wide. His interlocutors would write down their side of the conversation in pencil, and Beethoven would speak his side of the conversation aloud (in a few instances, when he wanted privacy, he also wrote). It is not known with certainty how many of the conversation books he filled during the nine years he communicated by this means, but Beethoven scholars today agree that 139 of the

books survive. All of this material has been transcribed and published in German by an editorial team under the direction of Karl-Heinz Köhler, and this monumental, eleven-volume edition³ is presently undergoing translation to English by Theodore Albrecht at Kent State University in Ohio (forthcoming in 2016). But to this day only snippets of the conversations have been published in English, most notably in Michael Hamburger's concise compilation *Beethoven: Letters, Journals and Conversations* (1952), an edition that Friedman relied on for some of his material.

Beethoven asked friends to write their conversations for the same reason many deaf people, including me, ask friends to write: It's practical, it's accessible, and it saves one from the grief that comes from misunderstandings when trying to lip-read. The problem with lipreading is that spoken language has too many visual homonyms—words that sound differently but look alike on the lips. It's embarrassingly easy to get things wrong. For example, the word "vacuum" looks like the phrase "fuck you." The phrase "she plays the guitar" looks like "she pees in a jar." "Lipreading" is something of a misnomer; it should be called "lipmisreading."

Except for a few conversations adapted from Hamburger's book, all of the conversations in Friedman's novel are fictionalized—and it's a tricky narrative genre to work with. The challenge is that writing on paper and talking on paper are very different kinds of communicative engagement. The words may seem familiar, but the way that they are put down on paper is not: Inscribed conversations backtrack, take sudden turns, and stop abruptly. Sometimes there is punctuation; sometimes not. Sometimes there are lines, arrows, and drawings—gestures of the pencil. Sometimes the words are lopsided (it's really hard to walk and write at the same time). Sometimes there are words on top of words. What makes inscribed conversations particularly important as linguistic artifacts is the way they present both the site and the sight of sound: the site, inasmuch as an otherwise evanescent moment of exchange becomes a material record of that exchange, and the sight, inasmuch as the personality, inflection, and tone of the speaker are revealed by the way the words are written on the page. Human communication is so much more complex than language alone: It also involves the body we put into it.

In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer remarked that writing cannot convey all the nuances of human speech: "Writing can never express as many emotions as the voice," he said.⁴ Although the inscribed word can be described as a form of embodied speech—one's handwriting is a



Left: Page from Sanford Friedman's manuscript for *Conversations with Beethoven*. Above: Joseph Grigely, *Paula H.* New York, May 24, 1996, 1997, R-print. From the series "Portraits," 1995–99.

and could not compose—and his penury pained him as badly as his liver did. Nothing makes an artist so wretched as feeling unappreciated, and Beethoven masterfully fulfills our expectations of his being a complete crank. It's not for nothing that Goethe charitably described him as "an utterly untamed personality." He lashes out at everyone and everything—his nephew, his nephew's mother, his brother, his doctors, and his amanuensis, who is dismissed at one moment and hired back the next. There's hardly a page without family recriminations of one kind or another. If *Conversations with Beethoven* were to be made into a movie, one could only expect Woody Allen to direct it.

Friedman's reader is treated to the experience of over-hearing inspired responses to Beethoven's outbursts:

I am concealing *nothing*. If your nephew has a mistress, I know nothing of it.

Whether the man fucked her three times or four is beside the point—

Why do your eyes bore into me so?

If I had a kronen for every time you called me a whore—
But never mind, that isn't why you sent for me.

Spare me that shit—I won't hear another word!

Calm yourself lest you have a stroke like our worthy

grandfather—

Please, you'll have an apoplexy if you don't stop shouting.

It does no good to keep calling him Cain.

But speaking of drinking, may I ask how many glasses of punch you have had?

Why do you look for ulterior motives where none exist?

I've known some pigheaded men, Brother, but you surely take the cake.

Have you taken leave of your senses!

Can you not be civil even in parting!

It would seem that he has some of your hot blood—one might even say that it runs in the Beethoven family.

The only person who seems to escape Beethoven's wrath is Michael Krenn, the semiliterate servant provided to him during an extended stay at his brother's estate in Gneixendorf, whom Beethoven surreptitiously deploys to overhear the dinnertime conversations he himself can't lip-read and to relay to him the content of what his family members are saying. It's a familiar scenario: As the painter Paul Bloodgood once wrote to me at a dinner in the mid-1990s, "We are talking about you in front of your front." Being deaf may have been an ideal condition

for composing, as Ned Rorem once implied, but for following dinnertime conversations it just plain sucks. Krenn—who is a real person and appears briefly in the German edition of Beethoven's conversation books—comes across, like Beethoven, as an underdog in social relations, and this (and the wine he regularly sneaked to Beethoven) endeared him to the cantankerous composer.

CONVERSATIONS WITH BEETHOVEN is not an easy book. Friedman finished the novel in the late '80s and spent the next twenty years trying to publish it. In 2010 he died of a heart attack, and it was then that his friend David Alexander brought the manuscript to New York Review Books, a publishing house unintimidated by experimental fiction. The narrative structure of *Conversations with Beethoven* is radically inventive, and so too are the various prosodic tools that Friedman uses to identify the individual speakers: The work could be a play if it weren't also a novel, and it could be a film script if it weren't also a play. In the end, its extraordinariness owes everything to the ordinariness of everyday conversation. Smallness is rarely so big. □

JOSEPH GRIGELY IS AN ARTIST, A CRITICAL THEORIST, AND CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VISUAL AND CRITICAL STUDIES AT THE SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO. (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)

For notes, see page 396.



Above: Canaletto, *Riva degli Schiavoni, Looking West* (detail), ca. 1735, oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 80 1/2".
 Right: Page from one of Ludwig van Beethoven's conversation books, January 1825.

form of personality—much of this is lost when the written word is transcribed into the printed word. The warbling lines, the spatial pauses, and even the paper itself—it all matters. But even a disembodied conversation has considerable intrigue for us, for it registers content that would otherwise seem so unexceptional that one could not imagine writing it down—as exemplified in an exchange between Beethoven and Gerhard von Breuning, the son of his friend Stephan von Breuning, in which Beethoven attempts to tease out from Gerhard an aside that he spoke but which Beethoven missed. The young man writes:

I said a dirty word.
 I'd rather not repeat it.
 Heavens no! It was not as dirty as that.
 Please don't insist.
 Please, I beg of you.
 shit

Ein Fetzen Gemeinschaft—“a scrap of commonness”—is how the late literary critic John Bayley would have described this exchange: a mix of the everyday and the vulgar. Such conversations provide the primary trajectory of Friedman's novel, which in so many ways focuses on Beethoven's domestic life—his health, his financial troubles, his relationship with family members, and, in particular, his relationship with his nephew Karl. The novel is not a narration of these mundane details as much as an activation of them. It provides a valuable

reflection on the genre of art known as the conversation piece, which evolved primarily among Dutch, French, and English painters in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Conversation pieces typically represent individuals engaged in a dynamic exchange. They are marked not by any stylistic idiom but by their detail of incident—how they capture the paralinguistic traces of conversation in gestures and poses. In many of his Venetian paintings, Canaletto portrayed small groups of people who seem to be chatting, people who seem to be yelling, and people whose gestures define their presence. In work like this, it's not just a visual scene being represented but the human occupation of that expanse—and the fact that this occupation is characterized by things that can be heard. Canaletto is a noisy painter. You can hear it in his painting *Riva degli Schiavoni, Looking West*, ca. 1735, for instance. In the foreground, a dog's head is cocked to the conversation of a cluster of people a few steps away; nearby, a boatswain gestures and shouts loudly enough to capture the attention of a woman walking by; beyond them, heads are turned and bodies are positioned in a way that says only one thing: Words are being exchanged.

In Friedman's novel, the words that get exchanged are exceptional by virtue of being totally unexceptional. The utterances in Beethoven's actual conversation books are generally brief; Friedman engages in some poetic license to embellish them with eloquence, though his subject matter is completely in line with the originals. *Conversations with Beethoven* is, in many

ways, an antiheroic novel, in which the great composer comes off as someone whose travails are like those of any other artist who lives a life of too much stress and too much alcohol. The details of this sort of existence are the very stuff of *rhopography*, as Norman Bryson has termed the depiction of the bits and pieces of ordinariness normally trampled underfoot or otherwise neglected as having no great import. These bits and pieces are what make a still-life painting, and they are what make Friedman's book a still-life novel. As a reader of these conversations, we become more properly voyeurs—not so much listening to, as listening in on, the exchanges. We hear things like this conversation, between Beethoven and Gerhard von Breuning, which Friedman borrowed from Hamburger's text, and which reveals only von Breuning's side of the exchange:

Has your appetite improved?
 By now you should be eating meat.
 Have you been given an enema?
 You should be given more of them.
 Have you finished reading Walter Scott?
 Would you like to read Schiller?

Anyone looking in the novel for grand insights about art and life and music will be disappointed—there are none. Like Gauguin's final years, so well documented in his letters to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid, Beethoven's conversations are dominated by concerns about money, suspicions and jealousies, and the imprudence of the wrong things said to the wrong people (he spites one of his doctors, for example, and many years later, the doctor reminds him of it: “Is it possible to forget such a filthy epithet?”). During the three months prior to his death in March 1827, Beethoven was confined to bed

