NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

A Sociable Silence: Silence and Sympathy in the Victorian Novel

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of English

By

Sarah Mason

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

September 2021

ABSTRACT

A Sociable Silence: Silence and Sympathy in the Victorian Novel

This dissertation argues that silence played a fundamental role in the Victorian novel and in Victorian novel writing, operating as a productive force in service of sympathetic exchange and creative labor. It examines Charles Lamb's and Thomas Carlyle's foundational roles in detaching silence from its traditional Romantic associations with solitude, escapism, and rurality before focusing on the social utility of silent space in novels by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot build silence into the urban and suburban settings of their novels, stretching the boundaries of Victorian realism in order to restore balance to the fictional soundscape and demonstrate silence's pertinence to human attention, sympathy, and moral development. My project reads these novels in conversation with the nineteenth-century rise of sound attenuating technologies that made urban silence possible both on and off the fictional page. Ultimately, I contend that writers such as Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot recognized silence as a narrative technology as well as a critical environmental condition. Their work takes the production of silence in hand, figuring its disappearance in a modernizing and urbanizing Britain as a threat to the sympathetic impulse and, through that, to social cohesion.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation could never have happened without the guidance of many generous individuals and brilliant minds. Faculty, graduate students, and visiting scholars from English, History, and the British Studies Cluster have helped shape me into the writer, thinker, and educator that I am today. I want to thank Jules Law and Julia Stern, in particular, for their dedication to teaching and their influence on my own engagement with students over the years. Johana Godfrey, Clay Cogswell, and Nina Moon, among many others, have been the kindest and most insightful colleagues I could ever have asked for. I also want to thank Nathan Mead, Kathy Daniels, and Dave Kuzel, who supported me at every turn as I navigated the world of graduate study.

My chair, Jules Law, and incisive readers Christopher Herbert and Christopher Lane have inspired me to produce my best work, challenging me to sharpen, expand, and complicate the lines of thought that comprise this project. Thank you all for your incredible generosity in engaging with my work, for your wisdom, and for your humor.

Finally, and most importantly, I want to acknowledge those who have been with me every step of the way on this journey. My husband and parents have been my tireless advocates, my cheerleading squad, my place of rest. To my mother, I can't thank you enough for your attention to and investment in my work. The love of my family and friends is the foundation on which everything I have accomplished is built.

This dissertation is dedicated to my Grandmother Dries, who waited eagerly to read these pages and never once doubted.

Table of Contents

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Introduction: Charles Lamb, Thomas Carlyle, and the Construction of Victorian Silence 6

Chapter 1: A Pause to the Roar: Silent Surroundings and Social Relations in *Bleak House* & *Little Dorrit* 44

Chapter 2: The Cultivation of Silent Space in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* 96

Chapter 3: Silence and the Ethics of Attention in George Eliot's Fiction 140

Conclusion: Moments of Silence and Silent Rooms: The Legacy of Victorian Silence 191

References 204

Introduction
Charles Lamb, Thomas Carlyle, and the Construction of Victorian Silence

"Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic…"
— Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1834)

"The first thing, the unconditional condition for anything to be done, consequently the very first thing that must be done is: create silence…"
— Søren Kierkegaard, *For Self-Examination* (1851)

"All Profound things, and emotions of things, are preceded and attended by Silence."
— Herman Melville, *Pierre* (1852)

Thomas Carlyle evidently didn't think much of his near-contemporary Charles Lamb. His posthumously published *Reminiscences* contained such a relentless characterization of England's "gentle Elia" that the Manchester Literary Club spent an entire 1886 meeting trying to rationalize Carlyle's "sneers" at "the most lovable character in [their] literary history" ("Carlyle's Sneers" 154).[1] One of the club's more skeptical members ultimately proclaimed Carlyle "deficient in that sympathy which would've enabled him to appreciate a genius so utterly opposed to his own as Lamb's was…" (ibid).[2] The meeting concluded on uneasy ground. The members' admiration for Carlyle—"perhaps the most penetrating intellectual and ethical force of [their] century"—couldn't be reconciled with their love of Lamb, that "memorable exemplar of genius and goodness" (153). While the natures of these literary "giants" were, as Mr. John Latimer asserts, "utterly antagonistic" (154), the two men shared—however unwittingly—one crucial endeavor.

[1] Among the *Reminiscences* quotes cited in the Manchester Literary Club's minutes are Carlyle's assertion that Lamb's "talk [was] contemptibly small, indicating wonderful ignorance and shallowness" and his characterization of the essayist as an "emblem of imbecility bodily and spiritual" (153).
[2] This statement is attributed to member Mr. John Mortimer.

Examined together, they are the progenitors of a nineteenth-century rhetoric of silence adopted and expanded by some of Victorian England's most formative authors.

In this introduction, I examine Charles Lamb's and Thomas Carlyle's foundational roles in the articulation and promotion of a silence that broke sharply with Romantic conceptions—particularly in its growing association with productivity, sociability, and urbanity. John M. Picker threw down the gauntlet for Victorian sound studies nearly two decades ago with *Victorian Soundscapes*, a study that emphasizes both the significance and heterogeneity of the Victorian aural experience.[3] His call has since been answered in the work of scholars such as Ivan Kreilkamp, Mark M. Smith, and Jennifer Esmail.[4] Studies of Victorian silence, however, have been slow to emerge. While scholars from R. Murray Schafer to Joy Parr recognize silence as a historically contingent and vital aspect of human experience—with Schafer insisting in 1977, "All research into sound must conclude with silence" (12), and Parr noting more recently, "Silence too has a history and a reservoir of contemporary meanings" (740)—no studies to date have taken nineteenth-century conceptions of silence as a lens through which to read Victorian novels and, by extension, Victorian social experience.

This dissertation approaches the still-burgeoning field of sound studies from a new angle: it expands our scholarly conception of silence by placing it at the center of a study of Victorian sympathy and social capital. By focusing on silence instead of voice or, more broadly, sound, I

---

[3] Picker, in turn, is answering earlier calls to study sound made by projects such as R. Murray Schafer's *The Tuning of the World* (1977), Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985), and Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* (2003).

[4] Ivan Kreilkamp*, Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005); Mark. M Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (2008); Jennifer Esmail, *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2013).

broach its significance as a physical commodity—as an environmental feature in its own right, rather than a mere counterpoint to sound or a figure for repression—as well as its evolving role in creative production and social engagement. The texts in this study posit silence as a key piece of the soundscape and of Victorian social life, challenging the familiar critical equation of silence with isolation, disconnection, and social withdrawal. As depicted in a range of works spanning the century, the Victorian relationship to silence represents a break with, rather than an extension or an inheritance of, dominant Romantic associations of silence with solitude, escape, and preindustrial life. For the writers in this study, silence is a product of technological advancement, rather than the antithesis of technology.

Of particular interest to my project is the correspondence between a coalescing Victorian rhetoric of silence and the emergence of a group of nineteenth-century technologies that produced silence in the urban and suburban environments of England and Western Europe more broadly. These "technologies of silence," as I call them, appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century and ranged from new methods of anesthetization and architectural sound-proofing to personal possessions such as the ear plug and the tennis shoe. Each one took aim at the noise that had become a fixture of daily life.

As midcentury writers such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë affirmed, the silence produced by these technologies—much like the silence built into the diegetic spaces of their narratives—enabled inherently social processes, from the accumulation and exchange of information to the cultivation of sympathy. These emerging technologies represented a Victorian impulse to find alternative ways of engaging with the world around them, rather than a desire to disconnect, withdraw, or get "out of network." Silent operating rooms, plugged ears, and sound-

insulated homes fostered creativity, intellectual productivity, and sympathy by opening up a space between isolation and confrontation: a space where self-preservation, autonomy, and social communion could coexist.

According to the traditional historical interpretation, sound in the Victorian period was an increasingly prominent feature of a social landscape that was itself becoming increasingly urban and technologized. A clear concomitant of these transformations was a rise in the "networked" character of Victorian social life.[5] Silence has consequently been understood as a negation of and, as was the case with many notable Romantics, a conscientious retirement from technology, mass culture, social networks, and social spaces. My dissertation, by contrast, emphasizes three things: First, silence was not perceived by Victorians as merely a passive condition (i.e., an absence of noise), but also as an intentionally produced phenomenon. Second, the production of silence had a technological aspect, and thus was not the antithesis of technology. And third, the production of silence often fostered sociality, and thus should not be considered antithetical to an increasingly networked social sphere but rather as complementary to it.[6] I address the first and third threads of this argument through an examination of Victorian literature, which envisages and advocates a certain active and social conception of silence. The second I approach through an analysis of the rhetoric surrounding particular technologies in the period.

---

[5] Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 4, 12. See also: Richard Menke, *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems* (2008) and Laura Otis, *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century* (2001).

[6] This study does not contest the relevance of the network figure or the significance of the telecommunications that gave it added force. Instead, it challenges the impulse to read silence-producing technologies—conversely, or by default—as anti-communicative.

Victorian writers were as troubled by the "repeated shocks" of modern life[7] as their Romantic predecessors had been, but they responded to the sensory onslaught and imbalance between sound and silence not by repeating the cry for solitude and retreat, but by integrating silence into their work and highlighting its potential as a social tool. With roots in the influence of Quakerism—and in Lamb's associated articulation of silence in his *Essays of Elia*—the rhetoric of silence at the heart of this study matured under the influence of Carlyle and expanded through the work of literary figures such as Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, Matthew Arnold, and George Eliot. The introductory sections that follow take early nineteenth-century articulations of a powerful, sociable, and technologically producible silence as the foundation on which the predominant Victorian rhetoric of silence was built. They flesh out a conception of silence under which the praise and production of this phenomenon represents a qualified embrace rather than a rejection of the urban and the social.

1 "A unit in aggregate"[8]: Charles Lamb and the Shared Silence of Quakers

The origin point for the rhetoric of social silence that this dissertation analyzes is a stuttering essayist with a passion for London and a deep admiration of Quaker principles. Overshadowed by—and often collapsed in literary criticism with—his better-known Romantic compatriots, Charles Lamb might seem an unlikely genesis figure for any significant social movement. Yet he was perhaps the only nineteenth-century figure who could have envisioned and articulated an experience of silence that broke so sharply with prevailing conceptions. Reflecting on Lamb near

[7] Quoted material from line 144 of Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar Gypsy" (1853).
[8] Quoted material from Lamb's essay, "A Quaker's Meeting" (1821). Lamb, *Selected Prose* (89).

the close of the century, Walter Pater assigned him "an understanding more entire than is possible for ordinary minds" (115) and "an enduring moral effect" (109).

With a finger on the pulse of the nation's philosophical and intellectual currents thanks to his vibrant social contacts, Lamb was nonetheless a figure on the fringe. He was religious in taste (if not in habit) and unimpressed by nature and music alike, while a dark family history set him even further apart from his peers. Partial to paradox in his writing, he distilled the anomalies that defined his life into a capacious and surprising conception of silence articulated in his essay, "A Quaker's Meeting." Lamb's aesthetic as a humorist must be considered in any discussion of his writing, but his characteristically light tone in the Elia essays cloaks incisive analyses of sound, social relations, and the urban environment.[9] In *Confessions of a Prosaic Dreamer*, Gerald Monsman argues for a reading of Lamb's essays as "sly critiques of the central dogmas of romanticism" (15-16).

Drawing inspiration from the vital role of silence in the Quaker religion, Lamb's 1821 essay delineates a silence notable for its productivity, communality, and urbanity. His characterization of silence breaks sharply with, even overtly mocks, the more-familiar emphases on solitude, seclusion, and anti-urban sentiment found in other Romantic works of the period. While his familiarity with Quakerism gives a distinct cast to Lamb's conception of silence, it was

[9] Writers across the nineteenth century acknowledge a sincerity and discernment at the core of Lamb's essays. William Hazlitt points to "an inward unction, a marrowy vein both in thought and feeling" (quoted in Procter 76). Bryan Procter calls the Elia essays "penetrating," with "[Lamb's] words running into the innermost sense of things" (9). Twenty-first century critics have also acknowledged Lamb's incisiveness. Donald Reiman argues that the Elia essays "explor[e] everyday events and trivial opinions that suggest, analogically, larger philosophical issues" (471), Tim Milnes finds "Elia" striking in his "impressionism and anti-dogmatism" (Milnes 330), and Adam Phillips sees Lamb's writings as "indicat[ion] of a new modern kind of sensibility" (*Selected Prose* xi).

his affinity for paradox that made his understanding of silence not only conceivable but expansive enough to be adopted (and adapted) by a diverse array of Victorian thinkers and writers.[10]

The particularities central to Lamb's life and writing coalesced around religion, sociality, and the "unrural notions" for which he was well known by friends and readers alike (*Selected Prose* 334).[11] Enthusiastically urban and touched by "unutterable sympathies with the multitudinous moving picture" of London's crowded streets, he acknowledged an "almost insurmountable aversion from solitude and rural scenes" in an 1802 submission to *The Reflector* ("The Londoner" n.p.). Denying the appeals of "dead nature" in one of his letters to Wordsworth, he insisted that it was London's "inventions of men and assemblies of men" that were "ever fresh and green and warm" (*Selected Prose* 331-32).[12] These declarations cast considerable doubt on Coleridge's poetic identification of "gentled-hearted Charles!" as one who "pined / and hunger'd after Nature, many a year, / In the great City pent" (29-31).[13] As Lamb took every opportunity in letter and essay to proclaim, he was London's devotee—not her prisoner.

Lamb's urban sentiments and distaste for solitude coexisted with a sensitivity to noise, an internal tension that informed his—and, later, many Victorians'—attraction to the idea of a

---

[10] The silence that writers such as Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot take up—a silence that is sought and produced in unlikely urban settings and deployed for social ends—is fundamentally paradoxical. In "Charles Lamb: Professor of Indifference" (2004), Tim Milnes calls this phenomenon "liminality" rather than paradox, claiming that Lamb's essays, "frequently invoke figures of liminality, of being in two or more states at once" (325). Jane Aaron, working in a similar vein, explores Lamb's self-declared "double-singleness" in *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb* (1991).

[11] Quoted material from a 7 February 1801 letter to Robert Lloyd: "Come to London and learn to sympathize with my unrural notions." Lamb letters are drawn from *Selected Prose,* unless otherwise stated.

[12] Letter to Wordsworth written on 30 January 1801. He tells Thomas Manning in a 28 November 1800 letter, "For my part, with reference to my friends northward, I must confess that I am not romance-bit about nature" (326).

[13] Lines drawn from Coleridge's "This Lime-tree Bower my Prison" (1797).

shared and sympathetic silence. While he possessed "a mind that loves to be at home in crowds" (340)[14] and a temperament suited to city life, he shared Londoners' near-universal desire for "refuge from the noises and clamors" (89). In "A Chapter on Ears," originally published in the *London Magazine* in 1821, Lamb derided the Romantic fetishization of hearing. "Delicately… provided with those conduits [ears]," his narrator "feel[s] no disposition to envy the mule for his plenty, or the mole for her exactness" ("A Chapter" 67). Proclaiming himself "constitutionally susceptible of noises," this thinly-veiled avatar for Lamb insists that he has "received a great deal more pain than pleasure from this so cried up faculty" (ibid)[15]—a statement anticipating the complaints of Victorian phonophobes such as Charles Babbage and John Leech.

Lamb's essay eschews the Romantic distinction between city noise and more-elevated sounds such as music, hewing to a much more absolute distinction between sound and *not sound* that resurfaces in later nineteenth-century works. While Lamb does differentiate between "unconnected, unset sounds" and the "measured malice of music," his essay privileges "the unpretending assemblage of honest common-life sounds" over a concerto's "endless battery of mere sounds" ("A Chapter" 68).[16] His assessment flies in the face of Romantic tributes to music such as Wordsworth's 1828 "On the Power of Sound." Wordsworth's poem—one among many

[14] Letter to Thomas Manning from late February 1801.

[15] The autobiographical quality of Lamb's essays is widely appreciated. I say thinly veiled, in this instance, because Lamb's personal distaste for music was widely known and discussed by nearly every writer who chose to remember Lamb after his death. In his 1848 essay, "Charles Lamb," Thomas de Quincey recalls that "Lamb had an insensibility to music more absolute than can have been often shared by any human creature, or perhaps than was ever before acknowledged so candidly. The sense of music…was utterly obliterated as with a sponge by nature herself from Lamb's organization" (n.p.). Bryan Procter (pseud. Barry Cornwall), writing in 1866, notes, "[Lamb] did not care for music" and claims that he "never heard a song in his house" (43).

[16] The resemblance between Lamb's phrasing and Edward Casaubon's perception of music as "measured noises" in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is uncanny (65).

examples in the early decades of the century—urges the reader to "give back thine ear" and accords music the power to uplift anyone, even a slave (lines 153, 53).

Companionable silence—quiet without solitude—emerged for Lamb as the solution to an otherwise irreconcilable antagonism between two equally important facets of his life: human society and intellectual production. Leigh Hunt once remarked that Lamb "would rather have been with a crowd that he disliked than felt himself alone" (Cornwall 78), but this love of company wrestled against the nagging awareness that perpetual interruptions diminished his intellectual labor. In "Many Friends," Lamb penned an ode to the door knocker that could well have been written by Carlyle, Babbage, or George Eliot's fictional Piero di Cosimo: "O! For an everlasting muffle upon that appalling instrument of torture! A knock makes me nervous; but a ring is a positive fillip to all the sour passions of my nature" (*Selected Prose* 274). This sentiment is far more telling in Lamb, however, who could scarcely be deemed antisocial. De Quincey pointed to "the excess of his social kindness" as an especial "habit" (n.p.); Procter reported that Lamb "hated noise, fuss, and fine words, but never hated any person" (Cornwall 73); and Edward Moxon claimed, "No man ever had a larger share of sympathy for those around him" (51).

A product of all the contrary sentiments outlined above, Lamb's "A Quaker's Meeting" contains the earliest nineteenth-century delineation of a silence that is productive, socially engaged, and sought within the bounds of an urban environment. The essay opens with an invitation:

> Reader, would'st thou know what true peace and quiet mean: would'st thou find a refuge from the noises and clamors of the multitude; would'st thou enjoy at once solitude and society; would'st thou possess the depth of thy own spirit in stillness, without being shut

> out from the consolatory faces of thy species; would'st thou be alone, and yet accompanied; solitary, yet not desolate; singular, yet not without some to keep thee in countenance; — a unit in aggregate; a simple in composite: — come with me to into a Quakers' Meeting. (*Selected Prose* 89)

For Lamb, this ideal state of silence does provide "refuge" from the clamor of urban living, but it does *not* entail an avoidance of the multitude itself. Instead, this silence unfolds among a multitude. Lamb is emphatic about the shared quality of this quietude, which promises "sympathy without the gabble of words" (90).

Taking aim at the tropes favored by fellow Romantics such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, Lamb scorns "inhuman, shy, single, shade-and-cavern-haunting solitariness" (90). Reveling in deepening layers of paradox, he detaches silence from its familiar association with nature, but also separates solitude from aloneness: "Dost thou love silence deep as that 'before the winds were made'? Go not out into the wilderness, descend not into the profundities of the earth" (89). "What is the stillness of the desert?" he asks, "compared with this place?"[17] In such quintessential Romantic settings, one can experience only "imperfect solitude"—a term Lamb defines as "that which a man enjoyeth by himself" (90). He admires instead those who "come together for the purposes of more complete, abstracted solitude," and his comparison of this shared silence to a "parliament without debate" further identifies the experience with a privileged urban environment (90-1).

The company of others provided something for Lamb that was both inarticulable and irreplaceable, and so his conception of silence hinges on the simultaneous enjoyment of stillness and society. His essay warns the reader of "wounds, which an imperfect solitude cannot heal"

[17] By "this place" Lamb refers, importantly, to the Quaker meeting house situated within city bounds.

and points to early religious hermits—those who "retired into Egyptian solitudes, not singly, but in shoals, to enjoy one another's want of conversation"—as fitting emblems for his conception of a restorative silence "rendered more intense by numbers" (90).[18] Tailoring this concept more closely to the personal experiences of his English readers, he asks: "What [is] so pleasant as to be reading a book through a long winter evening, with a friend sitting by — say, a wife — he, or she, too…reading another, without interruption, or oral communication?" (ibid). As Lamb protested even more boldly in an 1803 letter to Thomas Manning, "Are men nothing but word-trumpets?"[19]

Because Lamb's depiction of silence centers on the shared quality of the experience, it is uniquely nonexclusionary. Put another way, his essay foregrounds a presencing or production of silence rather than a shutting out of noise. He urges his silence-seeking audience, "Shut not up thy casements; nor pour wax into the little cells of thy ears, with little-faith'd self-mistrusting Ulysses.— Retire with me into a Quakers' Meeting" (89-90). Though Carlyle and many of the urban dwelling Victorians to follow him did batten down the hatches, so to speak, as protection from the city's tumult, Lamb lay the foundation for a perception of silence as a productive entity to be sought and sourced—not merely the absence of noise. He saw a potential in the communal silence of the Quaker meeting house, with "forty feeding like one" (94), which self-isolation and a prophylactic approach to the soundscape could not provide. This dissertation suggests that it is

[18] G. Gorman echoes Lamb's observation in *The amazing fact of Quaker worship* (1979), with his twentieth-century description of a Quaker meeting. He observes that, in such a meeting, "a far deeper awareness of unity can be reached without a word necessarily being spoken…The only outward sign of it is a greater depth of silence, the intensity of which may be literally felt" (10).

[19] Letter from February 1803 (*The Best Letters of Charles Lamb* n.p.).

Lamb's notion of silent sociability, a lesser-known strand of the Romantic conception of silence, that the Victorian writers in this study both inherited and deployed.

"A Quaker's Meeting" owes much to Lamb's longstanding interest in Quakerism and his relationships with practicing members of the religion such as Bernard Barton,[20] but the conception of silence that he articulated is one that proved to be capable of being taken up and transported into a largely secular context. The popular Victorian writers to whom this dissertation will turn detached Lamb's creed of silence from its ostensibly religious context—a maneuver made possible by his complicated religious posturing. I argue that Lamb himself, taking Quaker practice as a cogent working example, ultimately intended for secular analogs to shine through to his readers.

Steeped in religious sentiment and intensely fond of Quakerism's foundational texts,[21] Lamb was rarely acknowledged by his contemporaries as a Christian, making him an ideal figure to bridge the early nineteenth-century divide between religious and secular treatments of silence. De Quincey anticipated what readers of his essay might be wondering when he asked, "Was this man [Lamb]…in any profound sense a Christian?" His answer reflects the complexity of

[20] Procter notes that Lamb's correspondence with his "Quaker friend," Barton—an exchange that continued from 1822 until Lamb's death—"went on constantly" (Cornwall 65). He observes, further, that the letters written to Barton "exhibit more care and thought" than those sent to Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Manning (68).

[21] Lamb's letters provide a useful catalog of the various Quaker texts that he borrowed, read, and admired. Procter claims that among the first books Lamb "loved to read" were essays on religious themes, and says that the "history of the Quakers" as well as Wesley's biography "sank into his mind" (5). In a letter from Feb. 13, 1797, Lamb tells Coleridge that he has "thoughts of turning Quaker" and calls William Penn's *No Cross, No Crown* "good thoughts in good language." He claims, in the same letter, to love Quakerism as it is written by Penn and Wolman. Over twenty years later, in a December 1822 letter to Bernard Barton, he expresses his wish for a "Quaker circulating library," and in January of 1823 he borrows Fox's works from Barton with warm thanks. As his correspondence reveals, his interest in Quaker texts was extensive and prolonged.

Lamb's own sentiments: "The impression is that he was *not*. We, from private communications with him, can undertake to say that, according to his knowledge and opportunities for the study of Christianity, he *was*" (n.p. emphases original). Hunt, in turn, summarized Lamb's nebulous position as follows: "[He] liked to see church-goers continue to go…had nothing to object to conscientious Deists…[and] wouldn't have shut his door on an atheist" (qtd. in Cornwall 78).[22] In his own words, Lamb had "a taste for religion rather than a strong religious habit" (*Selected Prose* 298).[23]

Despite his reputation as Unitarian at best, Lamb drew on and alluded to a long history of Christian silence in "A Quaker's Meeting," citing early hermits and Carthusians as well as contemporary Quakers. In *Silence: A Christian History*, Diarmaid MacCulloch calls "the story of silence in Christianity…a matter of 3000 years" (12). It is in this religious domain that silence was consistently upheld as a positive rather than negative state. With the confluence between young Christianity and ancient Greek philosophy, MacCulloch explains, "silence comes to have as much to say about the sacred as speech" (27). Lamb invokes this long history when he writes of "Silence her sacred self…[who] hath her deeps that call unto deeps" and concludes that "Negation itself hath a positive more or less" (*Selected Prose* 90). His statement was a forerunner to those expressed by later thinkers across Europe, from Carlyle to Søren Kierkegaard. Filtered through the persona of the relatable, often-irreverent Elia, however, it became conceivable to use such truths in an extrareligious context.

---

[22] Hunt also wrote in *The Examiner* in 1819 that it was "difficult from his works to collect whether Mr. Lamb is a professed Christian or not."

[23] Letter written to Coleridge on 10 December 1796.

Nineteenth-century Quakers, Lamb suggests, presented the most substantive example of a modern community wielding silence for largely social ends. The transportation of their religious appreciation of silence into more-secular contexts—set in motion partly by Lamb's essay—was also made possible by Quakers' extensive participation in secular issues and arenas. Rolling up their sleeves to address everything from abolition to prison and asylum reform,[24] they repudiated the monastic impulse to withdraw from society and renounce secular involvement. MacCulloch cites the inventive and cooperative use of silence among members of other religious sects,[25] but Quakers were exemplary in their use of sonic insulation to fuel social contribution. They relied on silence not as a means of disengaging from society, but instead used the time spent in shared silence to fortify and inspire them in "endeavors to mend" the world outside their meeting house.[26] Victorian writers such as Dickens would use silence to do the same.

The Quaker integration of silence into social and religious practice did not simply coincide with a tendency toward activism; it also empowered and enabled that activism. According to Thomas Hamm, historians call the period from 1690 to 1820 "an era of quietism" for the Quakers (xv). He associates this quietist period, when silence became a fixture in their meetings and worship, with "innovation in Quaker attempts to influence the larger world" (xvi). Paula

---

[24] In *Quaker Writings: An Anthology, 1650-1920*, Thomas D. Hamm recounts how English Friends became "pioneers in the humane treatment of the mentally ill" (xvi). Their heavy involvement in the nineteenth-century Asylum Movement is perhaps one important reason that Lamb was drawn to and felt much affection for the Quaker people and their practices.

[25] According to MacCulloch, "Pachomian monks carried out useful trades in silence and ate their community meals in silence" (76), while a "regime of silence" at Cluny resulted in a "pioneering development of monastic sign language to replace speech in everyday transactions" (97). He also refers to the Benedictine "tradition" of "silent communal life," which remained strong until approximately 1100 (98-9).

[26] William Penn decried the "recluse Life" in *No Cross, No Crown*, arguing for a monastery *within* each person and claiming, "True Godliness does not turn Men out of the world, but enables them to live better in it, and excites their Endeavors to mend it" (57, 59).

Lippard also insists on a direct relation between Quakers' silent mode of worship and their "legacy of social-political reform and humanitarian work" (147). As she contends, "The work of Quakers in the world indicates that the power of their rhetoric of silence serves to forward those human endeavors" (153). The pattern of "withdrawal into silence and return to the practical world" that she cites as a "key principle of Quakerism" (152) aligns uncannily with the trope of silence as a precursor to social contribution in works by Lamb, Dickens, and Eliot, among others. Lippard even addresses the mechanics of how shared silence could engender social contribution, with a "sensitizing" of the conscience that transpires during silent communal worship (152).[27]

Lamb, a self-identified "Honorary Friend,"[28] used their lived example to ground his own resistance to British Romanticism's identification of silence with antisociality. In doing so, he became a bridge between the Quaker conception of a generative and communal silence and the Victorian push to incorporate silence into their urban spaces and social lives. Loath to leave the city, Lamb and his descendants in this literary genealogy propounded an alter-Romantic perspective on silence—one lifted from Quaker practices and adapted to urban secular needs. John Forster forecast the influence Lamb would have on a next generation of writers when he wrote that Lamb's two volumes of essays "contain a stock of matter which must be ever suggestive to more active minds, and will surely revisit the world in new shapes" (qtd. in

[27] She also discusses the process by which "the first stirrings of social reform are born and expressed to the silent group" (152).

[28] In a May 1826 letter to Bernard Barton, Lamb refers to Barton's "neat little poem" and writes, "I do not know how Friends will relish it, but we out-lyers, Honorary Friends, like it very well" (*Selected Prose* 401). An article in the 1954 Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association, "Honorary Friend: Charles Lamb and the Quakers," claims that "Quaker influence seems to have run deeper in [Lamb] than can be defined" and agrees that the self-given title of Honorary Friend "may be allowed to him in an Elian sense, to indicate his standing…within the radius of [the Society's] mild but widely pervasive influence" (82).

Cornwall 80). An anonymous tribute to Lamb in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1849 maintained that the "essays of Elia have been perused by all" (147).

If they had not exactly been perused by all, they had at least been perused—and internalized—by some of the most important novelists of the next generation. Picker reports that Dickens, "[b]y his twenty-sixth birthday…owned not one but two well-thumbed copies of the works of, in his words, 'the original, kind-hearted, veritable Elia'" (8). Picker views Victorian writers as "inheritors of the Romantics' preoccupation with the sublime force of the music and quiet of nature" (7)—citing the Lake Poets, specifically, as progenitors here—but claims it was Lamb's fondness for "the hubbub of London street life" that motivated Dickens and other journalists to "attend to and begin to archive the new 'common-life' sounds of the Victorian city" (8). Picker's assessment hews to a traditional association of silence with seclusion and the rural environment, crediting Lamb—that essentially metropolitan Romantic—with attention only to London's multitudinous sounds, and not to the oases of silence that he also affirmed as a crucial element of urban life.

Walter Scott used the term "social silence" as early as 1808 in a line from his romance, *Marmion*.[29] It appears in his introduction to Canto Fourth ("To James Skene"), as Scott recalls the comfortable companionship between himself and Skene in early years. After recounting the "wild unbounded hills [they] ranged, / While oft [their] talk its topic changed," he notes that when their talk "flagged, as oft will chance, / No effort [was] made to break its trance" and

[29] Scott uses the term in *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*. The following lines appear in his Introduction to Canto Fourth: "We could right pleasantly pursue / our sports in social silence too."

affirms, “We could right pleasantly pursue / Our sports in social silence too.” Scott’s assignation of sociality to this silence between friends is pertinent, but he couched his conception in unmistakably pastoral terms. It would take Lamb’s—and later, Carlyle’s—insistence that this kind of non-verbal engagement belonged not only among “unbounded hills” but also in the midst of the city to solidify the notion of an urban and manufacturable social silence.

While Scott’s appears to be the earliest use of this precise term, the nineteenth-century conception of silence to which it points—wherein silence enhances sociality instead of detracting from it—flourished in the decades after Lamb’s 1820s essays. British periodicals from the second half of the century capture Victorians’ interest in and expansive conception of silence. In a “well-attended” “Lecture on ‘Silence’” given at the Royal Institution in 1857 and reproduced in the *Hull Packet and East Riding Times*, one Mr. Hawkins elaborated the kinds and degrees of silence recognized in the period. Discussing a dozen different types of silence, including “expressive silence,” he pulls from prose and verse for illustration and support (n.p.). An 1868 article on “Sociable Silence” from *Once A Week* offers a similarly elaborate survey of silence as it appeared in popular literature. Its author focuses on social silence specifically, which he describes as “a silence which is felt to be sociable, when the silent associates are tried and trusty friends” (369). Echoing Lamb and Scott, he submits: “Wherever, in fact, there is implicit confidence, and an underlying sense of general sympathy, it is often a relief to be able to hold one’s peace” (ibid).

As the final two sections of this introduction will elucidate, Lamb’s rebranding of silence in 1821 owed its survival and maturation over the next fifty years to two additional forces at play in the nineteenth century: technological ingenuity in sound-attenuation and the pervasive influence of Thomas Carlyle.

2 Toward an Architectural Understanding of Silence

Picker and subsequent scholars characterize the Victorian soundscape as one of "unheard-of-loudness" (4). Yet Victorians conjured the imagination—and society the innovations—to reinstate silence in this throbbing environment. An 1873 article from *All the Year Round* (by then edited by Charles Culliford Boz Dickens) catalogs the various sound-proofing technologies that made silence possible in a modern industrial setting. Taking readers on a late-night walking tour of London, the unnamed writer details

> that period when silence is beginning to steal over the City like a mist, and settle down on it like a dense fog—a fog which seems to muffle every voice, put india-rubber tires round all the wheels, tie up every knocker with white kid, shoe every horse with felt, and every passer-by with American goloshes. ("In the Silent City" 61)

His layered metaphor builds a chain of association between urban silence and the sound-attenuating technologies that worked collectively to produce it. Silence "settle[s] down" over the streets like fog—notorious in the period for dampening sound—and this fog operates in turn like the shrewd placement of rubber, leather, and felt on noise-making bodies.

The abundance of sound-proofing materials in this passage reflects Victorians' growing awareness of and reliance on such technologies over the middle decades of the century. Methods for sound attenuation accumulate with a nonchalance that evinces the writer's (and his readers') familiarity with them by the 1870s. They appear in the passage—and in the walking tour it chronicles—as natural and necessary elements of city life.

As these silence-producing techniques increased in daily use from the 1840s to the 1860s, they began to make frequent appearances in popular literature. Consider, for example,

Eliot's Piero di Cosimo, who has the door knocker of his studio "thickly bound round with wool and ingeniously fashioned with cords" (*Romola* 176). Charlotte Brontë's Madame Beck moves about on "shoes of silence" (*Villette* 72), and Dickens's Aunt Betsey, armed with "a magazine of jewelers' cotton," sticks this substance in her ears during the birth of her nephew (*David Copperfield* 21). As the anonymous 1873 article and the works of these Victorian novelists attest, Victorians could—and *did*—envision the industrializing city (or, in the case of *Romola*, the pre-industrial but infinitely noise city) as a space in which to experience silence.[30]

The technologies of silence deployed in daily life and in Victorian literature ran the gamut from natural to manmade substances, domestic to public strategies, and individual to communal reach, but their value was not simply that they reduced noise. For the writers in this study, the value of these materials and methods lay, more specifically, in their capacity to produce silent space. Victorians and their fictional counterparts sought spaces where they could contemplate and create—often in company with others, or for the direct benefit of others—without sonic disruption. Contrary as she seems, Aunt Betsey inserts her earplugs so that she can share in the intimate and momentous occasion of a birth. She fashions her own silent space amid the throes of nineteenth-century childbirth. Piero di Cosimo, to follow up one further example, does not disable his door knocker in order to shun companionship; he protects his working space from unnecessary noise to the advantage of both his social interactions and creative productions.

[30] The anonymous writer opens this article with the assertion, "To City men the idea of silence being connected, in any way, with the City may appear in the highest degree ridiculous…they are so infected with the everlasting bustle, the eternal jingle of money, and the unceasing roar of the worshippers of the Golden Calf…City men never experience silence in the City" (61).

Contending with "the screech and roar of the railway and the clang of industry, [and] with the babble, bustle, and music of city streets" (Picker 4), Victorian innovators approached sound attenuation from every conceivable angle. Letters patent from the 1850s onward demonstrate an active intervention in both the production and reception of noise as they worked to produce silent space in urban and suburban settings. In Letter Patent No. 14 from 1856, Frederick Haines of Middlesex County claimed one of the earliest inventions for "the deadening of sound, and the prevention of vibration and concussion in connection with machinery, gun and mortar boats, and general ordnance, and other purposes" (1). Haines's particular method was "the application of cork of any necessary thickness, in conjunction with lead," which he recommended for everything from steam hammers to railway carriages, "ordinary vehicles," and the "shoeing of horses and cattle" (2). This breadth of application—a common feature in such patents, whether the agent ultimately recommended cork, lead, or "india rubber"—indicates the plethora of noises that assaulted Victorian ears.

Nineteenth-century patents for earplugs and acoustic insulation—tools enabling Victorians to live amid city noise—indicate a break with the Romantic inclination to escape urbanization and avoid the masses. They represent an embrace of modified urban living and technological advance and a desire to coexist with the sources of noise—including one's fellow inhabitants. An 1864 patent for an "Apparatus for Excluding Sound from the Ear" boasts that "any sound will become inaudible to the wearer" (Rein 1) and underscores the usefulness of the apparatus for persons "travelling by railway, and in numerous other cases where continuous crashing or other unpleasant noise may be distressing" (3). Its merit was that it softened or even canceled sensory discomfort as an individual went about their usual tasks. A second 1864 patent

for an almost identical device—Francis Fearon's "Improved Apparatus for Softening or Deadening Sound"—was even more explicit about its intention to be used in public, amid company. Fearon assured his readers, "the apparatus will not readily attract observation, and when worn by men wearing whiskers or beards…or by ladies wearing bonnet strings, will be almost invisible" (4).

Victorian homebuilding practices and structural modifications also manifested this technological enthusiasm for soundproofing, while the architectural principles set forth in public-facing guides and manuals emphasized the social benefit of quiet spaces so painstakingly carved out. As such texts disclose, the home was a space meant not only—or even principally—for retirement. It was an arena for social gathering, intellectual exchange, and "sympathetic" (i.e. shared) solitude as Lamb depicted it in 1821. Part I of *Blackwood Magazine*'s "How to Build a House and Live In It"—published in 1846 at the height of Britain's house-building mania[31]—declares one key "end, object, and use of all habitations" is as a place "to sit down with a friend or friends, as the case may be" (759). Written as a primer for "John Bull," a man in great need of a "comfortable, sensible house" (758), the series lays repeated emphasis on the thickness and quality of a dwelling's walls. It touts one Paris lodging, which, in contrast to England's "cheap, slight, shabby-genteel" habitations, has walls "of good solid stone, two feet thick on the outside" (762-4). While the street nearby is "rather noisy," this habitation still exudes quietude (762).[32]

[31] In *Architectural Identities*, Andrea Tange discusses the newfound employment of architects in home-building in the 1830s (39). She also catalogs the growing list of homeowner guides and manuals available by 1854 (53).
[32] For further discussion of the strategies and aims of domestic sound-proofing, see Chapter One.

Homeowners relied on solid walls, double walls, pugged floors, and lush carpeting to insulate their prized domestic spaces from external and internal tumult,[33] but Victorian authors and characters carried out an even more radical reclamation of silence in urban public spaces. Shattering the assumption that silence belonged only to nature and the private hearth—and, in this way, adhering to the spirit of Lamb's essay—they found ways to build silence back into the soundscape of a city at large. Dickens's characters prove far more successful at locating silence within London's public spaces than the author himself ever did,[34] but Londoners made a valiant effort to promote silence outside the walls of their homes.

City dwellers made a collective stand for silence on everything from street paving to street music. While Picker has helpfully illuminated the classist and racist overtones of the Victorian anti-street-music movement, he nonetheless recognizes it as a desperate response to London's "noisy, dizzy, scatterbrain atmosphere"[35] and an overture to that "commodity of precious value": silence (42). Urban noise reached new heights in this period and so "began…to alter the agents, subjects, and conditions of artistic and intellectual occupations" (42-3). Agitation for the legislative regulation of street noise hit new heights in response. Dickens even penned a letter, cosigned by a "loose federation of writers, artists, and intellectuals" (53),[36] that lodged the following complaint:

---

[33] David Vincent discusses the growing importance of wall thickness to Victorians in *Privacy: A Short History* and *I Hope I Don't Intrude*. He notes how, "increasingly, internal and external walls of urban housing stock were being constructed of materials hostile to eavesdropping" (32).

[34] In "Sound Matters," Mark Smith makes a key point about methodology in sound studies: "Because a soundscape may be both an actual environment and an abstract construction, it is important to treat it as both" (265).

[35] Picker cites this as a quote from a leading article in the *Times* (London) from 2 May 1856, pg. 9.

[36] Picker calls the cosignatories "a roster of the Victorian cultural elite" and notes that they included Alfred Tennyson, Forster, Leech, William Holman Hunt, Wilkie Collins, and Carlyle, among many others (61).

> Your correspondents are, all, professors and practitioners of one or other of the arts or sciences. In their devotion to their pursuits—tending to the peace and comfort of mankind—they are daily interrupted, harassed, worried, wearied, driven nearly mad, by street musicians. (Bass 41-42)

While the practitioners represented by this letter often followed quite solitary pursuits, Dickens was careful to note that their endeavors aimed at social welfare. Nurtured by quietude where they could find it, they—like the Quakers—returned with renewed energy to societal engagement and improvement.

The cosigners of Dickens's letter perceived London's unmediated levels of noise much as Jacques Attali articulated it in 1985: "Noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill…" (26). Henry Mayhew once compared the city's sonic output to the "awful magnificence of the great Torrent of Niagara," reasoning, "if the roar of the precipitated waters bewilders and affrights the mind, assuredly the riot and tumult of the traffic of London at once stun and terrify" (53). Sound's propensity to fracture intimate moments, interrupt social communion, and stop profound thought dead in its tracks was readily apparent—a reality that validated the technologies punctuating this violence as invaluable social tools. The seemingly mundane decision to resurface London streets with wood in the late 1830s and early 1840s[37] takes on new significance when viewed as one strand in a social movement to reclaim public space (in lived experience and in literature) for a shared and sympathetic silence.

---

[37] In *The Victorian City* (2012), Flanders explains that the "main selling point of wood was that it muffled the noise of the [horses'] hooves and the [iron carriage] wheels. Residents and businesses in busy parts of the city clamored to have their streets resurfaced in wood, and parts of Holborn, Regent Street, and Oxford Street were all wood paved by the early 1840s" (37). Sonically pleasing—shopkeepers reported they could "hear and speak to their customers"—wooden paving had fatal drawbacks and had to be largely replaced by 1846. It persisted, however, in "locations where noise abatement was essential" such as the Central Criminal Court (ibid). For more on the noise of London thoroughfares and sound-reduction techniques, see Peter Bailey's *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (1998).

3 "The prophet risen up": Carlyle's Doctrine of Silence[38]

My soul's first wish is silence, silence.
— Thomas Carlyle (1839)[39]

No Victorian—except, perhaps, for Charles Babbage—felt silence's growing scarcity as keenly or resisted it as tenaciously as Thomas Carlyle. One of Britain's foremost thinkers and a "known friend of silence,"[40] Carlyle carried Lamb's vision of silent engagement emphatically into the next generation. An 1873 article on "The Value of Silence" forecasts just how entwined his legacy would become with that critical and beleaguered commodity:

> 'Silence' is that thing beyond all else, now most conspicuous by its absence. Not alone in matters material, or mechanical, is silence now clean gone out…Of this we may be well persuaded, no great thought either in music or literature ever came from a leaking brain. All the great forces of nature are prepared in silence…In the midst of this babble (Babel) of sounds, we might hearken to the prophet that has risen up amongst us. He whose mission it is to preach the doctrines of silence and work—Carlyle… (254-55)

Fashioned here as Britain's high priest of silence, Carlyle presented this entity to his fellow citizens as a chief condition of good progress.[41] Driven by this certainty, he publicized and vocalized the philosophy of an expansive, socially productive, and morally weighted silence in a way that Lamb—England's reticent, mild-mannered, and stuttering Elia—never could have.

While the writers in this study hold true to the social movement Lamb initiated with his adaptation of Quaker silence, it was Carlyle's voice—his proclamations about and exhortations to

---

[38] Quoted phrase from "The Value of Silence" (1873), pg. 255. Carlyle refers explicitly to his own "doctrine of silence" in letters from 4 September 1839 and 26 September 1840 and to his "maxim" on 12 April 1840. All Carlyle letters in this dissertation have been accessed via the Carlyle Letters Online [CLO].
[39] Letter to John Stuart Mill from 23 March 1839.
[40] In a 2 December 1841 letter to Richard Monckton Milnes, Carlyle writes, "I am a known friend of silence."
[41] In a 1 May 1856 letter he calls silence, "one of the chief conditions of really good progress" (recipient unknown).

silent productivity—that Victorians would hear echoing across the century. Isabella Fyvie Mayo's 1895 reflection on Carlyle credited him with "a greater influence on British literature…and through that literature on the ethical, religious, and political beliefs of his time than any of his contemporaries" (15). She introduces this pillar of influence in her opening line as "he who exhorted us to silence in 35 volumes of stormy speech," suggesting that this facet of his persona might be the most recognizable to her late-century readers (ibid). Picker, too, distinguishes Carlyle as a champion of silence. Highlighting him among Britain's "advocates for silence," Picker deems his "renowned attack on noise" a "kind of overture to those that followed" (43).

Carlyle refers to a personal "doctrine of silence" over decades of correspondence, but the substance of this doctrine must be pieced together out of the maneuverings and maxims imbedded in his life and writings. This final section of my introduction examines his rhetorical promotion and physical pursuit of silence, and concludes with a closer look at the "doctrine" he would bestow on later nineteenth-century intellectuals.

A crucial aspect of Carlyle's influence on Victorian writers stemmed from his fetishization of silence in literature, speech, and letter and from his association of silence with productivity and social contribution. His notorious quest for quiet space in Chelsea, meanwhile, made emblematic a Victorian desire to enjoy silence and society—and the benefits of each—simultaneously.

Carlyle's advocacy for silence gave it a resonance and significance across the century that it wouldn't otherwise have acquired, and while his domestic practices and discussions of silence had an ostensibly antisocial edge—distinct from Lamb's focus on shared spaces, group consensus, and social warmth—his delineation of silence as an imperative for moral

development and, through that, societal progress tempered this antisociality and represented a common thread with Lamb and nineteenth-century Quakerism. He saw an equivalence between silence and the "Infinite" that made it worthy of the status of a doctrine. Drawing and discarding elements from each progenitor, Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot used Lamb's and Carlyle's tandem conceptions to construct their own visions of a Victorian silence that was expansive, productive, and indispensable to the social fabric of daily life.

Carlyle laid out some of his earliest dicta on silence in an altogether public manner, outlining a worship of silence for the British reading public in his first and only book-length work of fiction. Published exactly a decade after Lamb's collected essays,[42] *Sartor Resartus* (or, "*The Tailor Retailored*") gave renewed relevance to the promotion and production of silence. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor credit Carlyle's text with a "complex shift in sensibility that is ultimately the mutation of Romantic into Victorian literature" (*Resartus* xxxii) and a "turning away from an outmoded Romantic vision towards a Victorian social actuality" (xxxiii),[43] calling *Sartor Resartus* a "secular scripture for the Victorians" in their 1987 introduction—assessments that make Carlyle's treatment of silence in the text even more germane to a maturing Victorian conception of it.

Silence operates in *Sartor Resartus* and in Carlyle's personal doctrine as incubator and source material. It is, above all else, "the element in which great things fashion themselves together" (*Resartus* 165). These "great things"—whether ideas, inventions, or moral

[42] *Sartor Resartus* was first published in *Fraser's Magazine* from November 1833 to August 1834. It was published in book form in 1836. Lamb's essays were published as a collection in 1823.
[43] McSweeney and Sabor cite Janice L. Haney's "Shadow Hunting" (1978) as the basis of this second assertion.

advancements—reach well beyond the individual minds in which they take root. Under Carlyle's formulation, much like Lamb's, the fruits of this time spent in silence would ultimately "emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule" (ibid). The desired end set forth in Carlyle's chapter on "Symbols" is not perpetual silence, but rather speech and action informed by the moral growth and mental refinement that silence activates. "Thought," he warns, "will not work except in silence" (166). But if one remains silent, ensconced in silence, for even one day, "what wreck and rubbish have those mute workmen within thee swept away, when intrusive noises were shut out!" (165).

Noise impedes thought under the philosophy of silence sketched in *Sartor Resartus*, and in doing so thwarts man's ability to contemplate social problems and construct solutions. In a letter written to John Stuart Mill during the book's composition, Carlyle expressed a wish "to sit wholly silent for some three years from this date, til [he] had got to the bottom of many things."[44] His text pushes back against "these distracted times" (*Resartus* 208) and urges readers to deploy "their most concentrated attention" in the act of reading (42). Safeguarding the quality of his own attention as he wrote this seminal book, Carlyle produced Book III while leading "the stillest life" at Craigenputtock (xiii).[45] Silence thus emerged as an indispensable factor in the public-facing act of literary creation, both in the reality that Carlyle lived and in the text's account of its own production: "the warp of thy remarkable Volume lay on the loom; and silently, mysterious shuttles were putting in the woof!" (13).[46]

---

[44] Letter written on 16 October 1832.
[45] Letter to John Carlyle, 19 October 1830.
[46] The "Volume" also "issu[es] from the hitherto irreproachable Firm of Stillschweigen and Company" (6). "Stillschweigen" translates to "silence."

Protagonist Diogenes Teufelsdröckh further embodies Carlyle's principles of silent productivity and silent social engagement.[47] A likely prototype for Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe with his inscrutable personal history,[48] Teufelsdröckh "most commonly…spoke in mere monosyllables, or sat altogether silent" (18). Of himself he reports, "I was notable, if for anything, for a certain stillness of manner" (100), and the narrator refers to his "impenetrable reticence" (153). This stillness and reticence, however, amount to neither incommunicativeness nor disconnection. His "right arm" is a woman "so silent that some thought her dumb," with whom Teufelsdröckh communicates by signing. The narrator's reference to "some secret divination" by which this companion "guessed all [Teufelsdröckh's] wants" corresponds with an ideal Carlyle imagined in one 1830 letter, wherein man "convers[es]" silently with friends "as if these were already disembodied souls, dwelling beyond Time and Space."[49]

Carlyle's affirmations of silence as the secret to individual and societal advance stretched beyond this early publication, with exhortations for the collective pursuit of silence recurrent in his public and private speech. In an anecdote that underscores the irony of Carlyle's far more vocal endorsement of silence, Charles Darwin recalled "a funny dinner at [his] brother's" where Carlyle "silenced every one by haranguing during the whole dinner on the advantages of silence"

---

[47] McSweeney and Sabor translate "Teufelsdröckh" as "Devil's-excrement" (250).

[48] In Chapter 3, "Reminiscences," the narrator says that "no Biography of Teufelsdröckh was to be gathered; not so much as a false one. He was a Stranger there, wafted thither by what is called the course of circumstances…one of those originals and nondescripts…of whom, though you see them alive, and feel certain enough that they must have a History, no History seems to be discoverable" (13-14).

[49] Letter to Anna D. B. Montagu on 3 June 1830. George Eliot expresses a similar vision when she writes of "certain modes of thought [that] lie as it were in the atmosphere…and come to light in the most remote places without perceptible media of communication" (Letter to Miss Lewis on 2 November 1841). She also writes to Sara Hennell in early April of 1846, "See what it is to have a person en rapport with you, that knows all your thoughts without the trouble of communication!"

(Darwin n.p.). Darwin also recounted, with a rhetorical smirk, how "Babbage, in his grimmest manner, thanked Carlyle for his very interesting lecture on silence" (n.p.). While the author's incessant speech in this and other instances contradicted his proclamations of "speech silvern" and "silence golden" (*Resartus* 165), his twin roles as prophet and preacher for the "doctrines of silence and work" had exponential impact ("Value of Silence" 255). Carlyle's speechifying, welcome or not, exposed the prominent intellectual and literary circles he frequented to a line of thinking that— through such propagation—gained critical traction among Britain's most influential writers.

Carlyle's reliance on silence for intellectual productivity influenced his physical environment and daily movements as much as his rhetoric. In *The Carlyles at Home*, Thea Holme documents the almost innumerable measures taken by Jane and Thomas Carlyle in the domestic war they waged against ambient noise. With his "legendary" and "longstanding aversion to noises of all kinds" (Picker 43), Carlyle found cause for dismay in everything from neighboring fowls (Holme 60) to railway whistles (62) and piano-pounding young ladies (62-63). Jane's ongoing negotiations with bird, child, and piano-wielding tenants produced pockets of "peace and quietness" that were fleeting at best (62). Desperate for a more permanent remedy to sonic disruption, the Carlyles even considered renting the flat next to theirs in order to keep it "empty and noiseless." "What is £40 or £45 a year," Jane queried, "to saving one's life and sanity?" (60).

Carlyle's veneration of silence ran as deep as Lamb's, but his devotion to London and the urban environment did not[50]—a divergence that signals the capaciousness of this movement and the diversity of experience among its practitioners. Lamb refused to "abandon" his beloved city, calling the proposition a "monastic and terrible thought!,"[51] while Carlyle pursued silence into the countryside when necessary. He relied on the "silence and clear air" of Devonshire and other outlying districts to soothe his nerves and reanimate stalled projects[52]—a practice he shared with George Eliot and George Henry Lewes, among others. His customs were as distinct from Lamb's as Charlotte Brontë's were from Dickens's. But regardless of where they found it, the writers in this study saw silence as a vehicle for communion and contribution and not a means of withdrawal. Carlyle's enjoyment of "blessed silence" [53] in the countryside was not an altogether solitary exercise; his letters reveal a blending of silence and society most conducive to his labors.

This willingness to seek silence outside the city distinguished Carlyle's pursuit of silence from Lamb's, but his strenuous efforts to produce silence within London's bounds make him an emblematic figure for the embrace of sound-attenuating technologies.[54] The climax of his quest for silence in Chelsea was the construction of a "sound-proof" or "soundless" room at the top of

---

[50] Carlyle was nonetheless attached to London in his own way. He explains his relationship with the city in a letter to Margaret Carlyle on 24 August 1840: "I think always some time or other I shall get myself a little house by the seaside; and live far away from all the noise of London. But one must 'follow his star.' I seem to have considerable work cut out for me here; and I ought to feel I was greatly blessed in getting it put forward. London does not *seduce* me in any way; but I grow more accustomed to it, see much in it one might learn to like. On the whole I compare myself to the *Cats*; I am dreadfully ill to *heft* to a place; and then dreadfully difficult to stir when once *hefted*" (emphases original).

[51] Letter to Thomas Hood, 18 September 1827 ("The Best Letters" n.p.).

[52] See, for one example, his letter to Jean Carlyle Aitken on 4 February 1865.

[53] See letters from 10 February 1865 and 29 August 1864 for uses of this epithet.

[54] One method employed after consultation with London builder "Pearson" was stuffing the shutters with "cotton wool," while zinc pipes inserted in the walls supplied fresh air from outside (72).

their house on Cheyne Row.[55] Contemplating a "workroom at the end of the garden" or a "well deafened observatory" as early as 1843, Carlyle finally commissioned John Chorley to oversee the project in 1853. Holme notes that Cheyne Row "had become a busy street" by that point, with "horses and carts rattl[ing] continually and street vendors shout[ing] their wares" (93). Letters requesting the removal of noisy poultry would no longer do the trick.

Though it ultimately proved unsuccessful, at least in cancelling all noise, the costly remodeling in Chelsea represents a prime example of nineteenth-century acoustic intervention in the urban soundscape. Carlyle detailed the undertaking, and the motivation behind it, in a letter to his sister:

> All summer I have been more or less annoyed with *noises*…which get free access through my open windows: all the tinkering and "repairing" has done no good in that respect… [A]fter deep deliberation, I have fairly decided to have a top story put upon the house, one big apartment, 20 feet square, with thin *double* walls, light from the top, etc., and artfully ventilated—into which no sound *can* come; and all the cocks in nature may crow round it, without my hearing a whisper of them! (To Jean Carlyle Aitken, 11 August 1853)

The real annoyance was the limping pace of Carlyle's *History of Friedrich II of Prussia*, and he applied all known means of structural sound-attenuation in the service of this literary enterprise. His innovative study featured a new roof "boarded and covered with the best Bangor slate," "horizontal glazed sashes…under the skylight, forming an air chamber between," and "double walls…at the east and west end of the room…forming on each side a cupboard about 3 feet deep between inner and outer wall" (Holme 95). Promising in blueprint form with its extensive use of

[55] Jane and Thomas make multiple references to this building project in their letters. In a 9 May 1843 letter to Jeannie Welsh, Jane reports that Carlyle wants to build a "well deafened observatory aloft," while he writes to Jane on 22 July 1853, "The Builder has sent in his plan: decidedly a good and promising *soundless room*" (emphasis original).

air pockets, the final product fell short of Carlyle's expectations. Poor construction undermined its potential, while the skylight gave free access to a whole new assortment of urban sounds.

Examined together, Carlyle's public rhetoric, renovations, and private correspondence give substance to a "doctrine of silence" he enthusiastically preached but never defined in print. Silence, "the Highest Divinity on this Earth," that "giver of all Truth, of all Good that has any substance or continuance in it,"[56] meant many things to Carlyle and to those who took up his creed. Indispensable for creative labor of any worth, it was restorative, purifying, and "quasi-divine"[57]—a characterization that sat well alongside Lamb's 1821 conception. And while Carlyle's rhetoric carried fewer social inflections than Lamb's[58]—often foregrounding silence's benefits for the individual adherent—his letters also depicted silence as a medium for the development and exchange of sympathy.

The Victorian alignment of silence with productivity has its roots in Carlyle's tireless coupling of the two. He rarely missed an opportunity to mention that the companions that suited him best were "work and silence," and observed in one 1842 epistle that with "silence and free air and thought" he had "all things."[59] Sundays were sacred workdays in the Carlyle home, thanks to the "blessed silence." With a "cessation of barrel-organs, pianos, tumults, and

[56] Letter to John Sterling on 11 September 1836.
[57] Letter to Joseph Neuberg on 10 September 1863.
[58] This is not to say that social inflections are *absent* from Carlyle's writings about silence. He comments on multiple occasions about Jane's and other individuals' "talent for silence" (e.g. 15 August 1831, 8 September 1831)—an attribute he prized in close companions. He also describes an enjoyment of silence in the plural on occasion, remarking on 30 August 1863, for instance, "We have a silence such as cannot be surpassed and everybody is as good as gold."
[59] His preference for "Work and Silence as company" appears in a 28 June 1864 letter to Thomas Woolner, while his declaration of "silence and free air and thought" as "all things" is in a 4 April 1842 letter to Jane.

jumblings" that Carlyle called "divine," he could "easily do a better day's work than on any other of the seven."[60] Frequent home renovations, trips to the countryside, and this secular appropriation of Sabbath stillness all point back to that fundamental truth at the heart of *Sartor*: thought thrives only in silence (166). Only in silence could he "grapple, beak and claws, to [the] work" he wished to share with the world.[61]

Carlyle was also one of the first Victorians explicitly to connect silence with good health and noise with physical degradation, anticipating any official recognition of sound as a potential pollutant by more than a hundred years.[62] His letters draw innumerable links between bodily restoration—not to mention mental composure—and sound attenuation. In one 1861 letter to Lord Ashburton, he looks forward to "a ride on the still Sunday (amid multitudinous old thoughts), and a little quiet talk or silence" as a "medicine" to him.[63] He wrote of silence's salubrious properties as early as 1844, more than fifteen years before Florence Nightingale's *Notes on Nursing* pronounced quietude as vital as cleanliness in the art of healing.[64] Nightingale's section on "Noise" bears out Carlyle's cognizance of its potential to be injurious. In it, she deems "unnecessary noise…the most cruel absence of care which can be inflicted either on sick or well," and warns, "the fidget of silk and of crinoline, the rattling of keys, the creaking of stays and of shoes, will do a patient more harm than all the medicines in the world will do him good" (Section IV., n.p.).

---

[60] His discussion of the productive Sabbath is in a letter to Jane from 29 August 1864.
[61] Letter to John Carlyle from 27 July 1864.
[62] See, for example, Carlyle's letters from 4 February 1865, 14 February 65, 16 July 60.
[63] Letter written on 10 November 1861.
[64] In a 25 June 1844 letter to Jane, Carlyle reports that he is "wonderfully composed by…silence" and affirms, "It does one real good,— as you know I always believe."

In its potential to heal, improve, and direct mankind, silence—for Carlyle, as for Lamb—was the closest one could come to the presence of the divine in a distractable and broken world. Carlyle's epistolary references to silence include modifiers such as "blessed" and "heavenly," and he recounts experiences of "almost miraculous" and "quasi-divine" states of silence.[65] Writing to Margaret Carlyle about the "considerable work" at hand for him in London and the status of an "abstruse" project still developing in his mind, he enjoined, self-reflexively, "Let us be quiet, let us be pious-minded, listen to the Silences — to 'the still small voices' — ourselves silent."[66] Profound insight and intellectual labor form a Carlylean triad with "godlike" silence in this and other reflections, though Carlyle was certainly not the first or the final nineteenth-century writer to bind the three together.[67]

In this nineteenth-century formulation, it was not necessary to remain wrapped in silence in perpetuity to receive its benefits; instead, silence primed the valuable qualities and materials within an individual for reentrance and contribution to the wider world. "Nothing can ferment itself to clearness in a *colander*," Carlyle insisted.[68] Attempting to share his own meaning for "silence" in a letter to Geraldine Jewsbury on July 16, 1840, he explained:

> Really I have in my hopelessness no other word: I do mean by it a great world of things; which are unknown unheeded to this generation…I would have us to consider that after all our scheming, calculating, working and exhibiting, we are a kind of growing *trees;* that

[65] On 10 September 1863, Carlyle tells Joseph Neuberg, "the silence itself has been something quasi-divine to me," and on 7 August 1861, he "congratulate[s] [him]self on [his] own almost miraculous state of silence" in Chelsea.
[66] Letter to Margaret A. Carlyle from 24 August 1840. The quoted material is a reference to 1 Kings 19:11-13: "…but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. So it was, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave. Suddenly a voice came to him…" (NKJV). Arnold Matthew alludes to the same passage in a 2 December 1862 letter to Francis Turner Palgrave, when he writes, "then I wrap my face in my mantle and seek the Lord, I hope, in silence for a year or two." Arnold, too, connects this passage and the silence it signposts with profound insight and intellectual labor.
[67] Carlyle asserts in a 31 March 1842 letter to Henrietta Maria Stanley, "Silence alone is noble, godlike."
[68] Written in an 18 January 1842 letter to James H. Stirling. Emphasis is original.

> our *roots* are in the deep bosom of the Infinite, and all that we *shew* above ground, to others or even to ourselves, is poor and small in comparison. For all speculation, still more for all conduct I find this of Silence (what I mean thereby) a most significant fact.

For Lamb, Carlyle, and the writers that follow, silence was both a forerunner and complement to the "wise communing" between persons that may happen aloud, in print, or in complete stillness.[69] Silence was not meant to replace speech, writing, or active engagement, but rather to refine all of these, and more, by enhancing virtue and fostering sympathy. As Carlyle said of his brother, John, in an 1854 letter, "I feel a great sympathy with him, — greater from this very silence than the most eloquent writing could have raised in me."[70]

4 Putting Silence to Work: Victorian Silence from *Bleak House* to *Middlemarch*

> *My Life threatens all to go to rubbish here, if I do not look to it. The braying uproar of this City is distractive and destructive to me: and yet the question, How to keep what of really valuable I possess in it, and avoid what renders all possession nearly worthless? baffles my best endeavor hitherto. Patience,—at lowest Silence, and shuffle the cards!*
>
> — Carlyle (1841)[71]

The authors in the chapters that follow take up Lamb's and Carlyle's independent articulations of an expansive, productive, and sympathy-inducing silence.[72] Guided by their own relationships with silence, technology, and urbanization, Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot modified and extended the

---

[69] In a 13 June 1833 letter to John Stuart Mill, Carlyle writes, "Perhaps you are very wise in that self-seclusion you practice, in spirit-sickness of such a sort; yet also perhaps not. There is inconceivable virtue in Silence, yet often also in wise communing of man with man."

[70] Letter to Jean Carlyle Aitken, 9 January 1854.

[71] Written in a letter from 13 May 1841.

[72] I am focusing on "independent articulations," because while is it highly unlikely that Carlyle did not read Lamb's essays, he managed never to cite him in his own published works or written correspondence. By "expansive," I mean that Victorian conceptions are notable for the plurality of meanings they attribute to silence—a feature that stands in contrast to the Romantics' more polemical casting of silence as solitude and vacuity. This dissertation acknowledges that plurality, while homing in on the social inflections of Victorian silence.

parameters of Victorian silence laid out by the unlikely pair above. The remainder of this dissertation fleshes out the thematics of silence initiated by Lamb, elaborated by Carlyle, and thrown into relief by the popular literature of Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot. Reinforcing the perception of silence as an incubator for creativity and sympathy, their novels modelled the production and use of silent space for nineteenth-century readers.

Silence, we will see, operates at two main levels in the Victorian novels I examine: in the diegetic space, at the level of the individual characters who create, leverage, and share silence within the physical settings of these texts, and—in works such as *Villette* and *Middlemarch*—at the level of the narrator, who grapples with the inherent limitations of narration while testing the viable bounds of reticence and sensory manipulation. While Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot instilled their own intimate encounters with silence into their works, common threads persist in their interpretations and interpolations of those who came before. Dickens combined Lamb's deep love for London—its physical spaces and living masses—with a Carlylean work ethic that pitted ambient noise against literary output. Meanwhile, Brontë's depiction of a writerly mind as a "silent workshop"[73] evokes the silent shuttles weaving *Sartor Resartus*, and Eliot's use of "dual solitude" to describe her and Lewes's fond co-working practice[74] bears an uncanny resemblance to Lamb's "perfect" solitude.

[73] In a 23 October 1861 letter, Eliot writes, "We [she and Lewes] shall enjoy our dual solitude." On 16 June 1874, she writes again, "We are selfishly bent on dual solitude." She describes their pursuit of independent projects in various shared spaces across her correspondence.

[74] Brontë writes to W. S. Williams on 17 September 1849 of "an author" who "fabricated [his work] darkly in the silent workshop of his own brain." The description is self-referential; Brontë had not yet revealed her sex.

Chapter One, "A Pause to the Roar," uses readings of Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) and *Little Dorrit* (1857) to argue for the inherent role that silent spaces play in the growth and maturation of Dickensian social relations. It puts contemporary writings on architecture and experimental methods for sound attenuation in conversation with Dickens's deployment of silence in service of moral development and intimate exchanges among characters. A preeminent writer of the urban landscape, Dickens bends literary realism in his reincorporation of silent space into the Victorian city—insisting that silence can be found outside of domestic sphere and ought to be used even in the most public of spaces.

In Chapter Two, "The Cultivation of Silent Space in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," I turn to the muted spaces and silent machinations that comprise Brontë's fourth novel. Highlighting the autobiographical influences and narrative techniques that make *Villette* a challenging novel to categorize—ostensibly urban, with Brussels as its backdrop, but almost pastoral in tenor—I argue that Brontë took Dickens's work a step further in her careful attention to the production of quiet space and the varied methods that make it possible. Brontë's characters not only find but actively cultivate silence. Recognizing the sonic realm as a key arena in the struggle for power, they wield silence in ongoing negotiations of the terms of intimacy and engagement.

My final chapter, "Silence and the Ethics of Attention in George Eliot's Fiction," analyzes Eliot's developing thematics of silence relative to nineteenth-century conversations about sensory bombardment and the human capacity for focused attention. Suggesting that Eliot anticipated later thinkers in her concern about the inverse relationship between overstimulation

and attentiveness,[75] I read *The Lifted Veil*, *Romola*, and *Middlemarch* as literary experimentations in sensory and sonic manipulation. Eliot exposes the fragile boundaries of human attention in *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola*, emphasizing the negative impact of aural inundation, in particular, on sympathy and altruism. Positing silence as a key ingredient in the kind of moral attention she saw as indispensable to social cohesion, Eliot re-envisions the diegetic soundscape in *Middlemarch*, paring sensory detail to its most essential in order to focus that vital beam of readerly concentration.

[75] While I refer here to the late-nineteenth-century psychologists and physiologists that Eliot anticipates in her literary examinations of human attention, figures such as William Wordsworth and Matthew Arnold had already begun to highlight the ill effects of overstimulation (e.g., in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*).

Chapter One
A Pause to the Roar: Silent Surroundings and Social Relations in *Bleak House* & *Little Dorrit*

"*I feel indeed that silence, like gold across the Atlantic, is a rarity at a premium.*"
—Charles Dickens[76]

Among the alterations that Charles Dickens made to his beloved Devonshire Terrace home was the addition of a second, baize door to protect his study from outside noise.[77] His relatively strict routine entailed writing (in this very study) from breakfast till lunch without interruption. According to his eldest daughter, "Mamie," Dickens carried an aura of silence about him after a hard morning's work at his writing desk. Joining his family for luncheon after such mornings, "any sudden sound, as the dropping of a spoon or the clinking of a glass, would send a spasm of pain across his face" (M Dickens 70).[78] While the installation of a second door to protect his writing space from stray sounds might read as an antisocial impulse—a signal of detachment from the outside world—it enabled a creative process that was anything but aloof.

Dickens's writing was his conduit into the homes, hearthsides, and hearts of England and beyond. His characters were familiar acquaintances. Looking out from framed portraits on his walls, they were as dear to him as persons of flesh and blood. Completing *Oliver Twist* in 1838, Dickens admitted that he "would fain linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long

[76] Excerpt from a 6 September 1869 letter to Arthur Ryland.

[77] According to John Forster, out of all the homes that Dickens lived in, "he cared most for Devonshire Terrace" (qtd. in Macaskill 63). Information about the second study door appears in Hilary Macaskill's 2011 *Charles Dickens at Home* (63) and Peter Clark's *Dickens's London* (2012). According to Clark, "His study at Devonshire Terrace opened on to the garden but there was an extra baize door to enable him to keep out the noise as he worked" (n.p.).

[78] Quote from Mary "Mamie" Dickens's *My Father as I Recall Him* (1897).

moved," while his son, Charley, insisted, for better or worse, "that the children of [his] father's brain were much more real to him at times than we were" (qtd. in Macaskill 63). For Dickens, writing was a social and socializing process, and silence was a crucial ingredient in that process.

Dickens was not the only professional writer to struggle against the proliferating sound waves of an urbanizing England. As the population of England and Wales doubled between 1801 and 1851 and the percentage of urban dwellers grew from 20 percent to 54 percent (Burnett 4, 7), the decibels of daily life increased in turn. In his groundbreaking study *Victorian Soundscapes*, John M. Picker calls the Victorian Age "a period of unprecedented amplification, unheard-of-loudness" (4). As scholars such as Murray Baumgarten, Julian Wolfreys, and John O. Jordan have noted, the London of Dickens's pen was defined in large part by the interplay the between writer and environment—namely, by the impact of London's "explosive growth" on Dickens and his "response to [this] challenge" (Baumgarten 220).[79] Dickens's personal writings and fictional work alike give a sense of the ever-increasing sensory bombardment that Londoners faced and the simultaneously rising importance of silence to their conceptions of self, sociality, and the act of writing, among other things.

In "Urban Initiations: Arriving in Dickens's London," Jordan argues that the rise of London and other urban centers produced "new modes of writing," as writers strove to make such environments "comprehensible" to their readers (n.p.). The cacophony of urban life by the early 1850s directly influenced Dickens's valuation and depiction of silence, yet silence's role in the

[79] Nancy Metz uses Dickens's impressions of America in 1842 to suggest that "Victorian men and women forged their identities" through "their relationship to the ambient sounds of their culture, no less than in the gaze they brought to bear upon the world" (97), while Baumgarten claims that Dickens's fictional work makes the "special relationship between the rise of the city and the rise of the novel" especially apparent (221).

Dickensian city has not received any sustained study.[80] His fiction is alive to the social potential of a space of silence: A whole world of social relations unfolds in the silences that he and his characters manage to carve out of life. Scholars such as Picker and Richard Menke attend, respectively, to the play of sound in the Dickensian soundscape and to Dickens's relationship with technologies such as the railway and telegraph that have come to define the period, but no study has investigated this other half of the soundscape (i.e. silence) or the materials and techniques that made its presence in an urban environment possible.[81] This chapter thus undertakes an examination of the technologies, both organic and manmade, fictional and material, that Dickens used to produce silence in the London of his 1850s narratives and in his own life.

Dickens's later works, among them *Bleak House* (1852-53) and *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), unfold at the height of London's growth and bustle and best reveal his interest in maintaining a balanced soundscape. In referring to a "balanced soundscape,"[82] I mean a sonic environment that offers far greater equilibrium between sound and silence than did urbanized England. I want to emphasize, further, that the larger issue at hand is not a question of sound *versus* silence—whether in Victorian or Dickensian London—but rather a recognition that both are equally

---

[80] In *Dickens's London*, Julian Wolfreys points to the dearth of critical work on quietness in the Dickensian city: "No one has, to my knowledge, written or considered a phenomenology of quiet; less still has there been a study of quiet in relation to either space or place" (140, emphasis original). Acknowledging that it seems "counterintuitive" to associate quietness with "a site such as nineteenth-century London" (145), he nevertheless insists—and my own chapter will bear out—that "quietness, quietude, quiet places…give themselves everywhere in London, throughout the text of Dickens, in the midst of noise, confusion" (140). While this chapter maintains a distinction between silent and quiet—homing in on Dickens's scarce yet telling attention to silence and silent space—the distinction between them threatens constantly to collapse.

[81] While scholarship on fictional soundscapes continues to grow, generating a productive convergence between acoustemology and literary studies, work on quietness—and more radically yet, on *silence*—remains scarce.

[82] To my knowledge, this term does not appear directly in the writings of Dickens or other Victorian writers.

necessary to the social and creative lives of a city's human inhabitants.[83] Mamie makes the importance of this balance in her father's life clear in her recollections of him: while Dickens often required silence to work, when he left off writing "the bustle and noise of a great city seemed necessary to him" (M Dickens 47).

1 Networks and Bridges in the Dickensian City

Many scholars have turned to the figure of the network to address human sociality in Dickens's London,[84] yet the networking and communication technologies underscored in scholarship often represented a threat to privacy, and with it, true intimacy.[85] With the advent of the telegraph and its "open" communication network, Victorians faced the uncomfortable reality that "even familiar connections would be mediated by strangers" (Rosenthal 290). Anxiety about the public nature of modern media and travel reinforced Victorians' desire to protect privacy wherever possible, raising the value of social contact that transpired in person and reached beyond language: connections that could not be intercepted or overheard.[86] Herein lies the value of

[83] Though this chapter, and the larger study to which it belongs, privileges silence, it avoids an oversimplified conception of sound as bad and silence as good. Dickens, the most ambivalent of all the writers in this study when it comes to silence, would have disputed such a conception.

[84] In work by Baumgarten, Anna Gibson, and Allen MacDuffie, among others, networks prove crucial to the conception and functioning of such a dynamic urban environment—and to the social lives of its many inhabitants. Gibson characterizes Dickens's city dwellers as a "dynamic web of nomadic characters who…act, react, and adapt to one another to form what can best be described as a network" (65-6). She defines the kind of network at play in Dickens's novels as a "self-generating and open system of interactions," distinguishing her invocation of network from work by Caroline Levine and Jonathan H. Grossman and from "the mapped character networks that Franco Moretti uses to represent novel form" (65). According to Caroline Levine in "Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordance of Form" (2009), *Bleak House* proves that you can "hang networks on narratives" (517).

[85] Jesse Rosenthal highlights this phenomenon most convincingly in "The Untrusted Medium: Open Networks, Secret Writing, and *Little Dorrit*." In *Privacy: A Short History* (2016), David Vincent also contends that the communication revolution and even railway travel "facilitated greater withdrawal from everyday sociability" (27).

[86] Ann Gaylin gives a compelling treatment of the threat of eavesdropping in *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust* (2002).

silent space in Dickensian London. Though silence would seem to be the anti- social network, it has much to do with the "unseen connectedness" among Dickens characters that scholars note (Grossman 6). In Dickens's London, it offers a chance of unmediated connection that modern technologies like the telegraph fail to provide.

Dickens's use of silence for social connection posits the moderation of sound—the carving out of silent space—as a way of prioritizing and protecting intimate exchanges. Silence provides a space for intimate knowing—of oneself, others, and the world around. It is silence rather than overt communication networks that fosters sociality and the personal development that hinges on such relations. Dickens therefore does the seemingly impossible in his later fiction: he builds silence back into the urban environment, reinstating it in the soundscape in ways that occasionally run counter to his realism. For, as Wolfreys notes, it seems unlikely to find quiet—let alone silence—in nineteenth-century London and its environs. In creating space for silence, Dickens highlights how crucial this threatened commodity is to the human inhabitants of modern cities. Urban noise, as colorful, entertaining, and even necessary as it may be, erodes the social fabric. While it is important to note the distinction between noise, racket, or hubbub and the sounds of human interaction, these two categories of sound become part and parcel at the level of the city soundscape—blurred together in its density and diversity.

The figure of the Iron Bridge in *Little Dorrit* best exemplifies the production of silent space that proves so integral to sociality in Dickens's urban narratives. Located in the midst of London, the Iron Bridge enacts a sound buffering that sets it apart from other urban spaces in the novel. Literally suspended over water, the bridge's physical form mirrors and reinforces the sonic suspension of the silence it produces. According to Dickens's narrator, the bridge is "as

quiet after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country" (Dickens 111). Arthur Clennam prefers to go in the "quieter direction" of the Iron Bridge (277), and John Chivery, too, notes the quietness of the place when he seeks Amy Dorrit there (234). Characters such as Clennam, Chivery, and Amy Dorrit use the bridge for their social encounters and romantic transactions precisely because it is a comparatively silent space. Over the course of the novel, it becomes a privileged site for human interaction. Though acoustically insulated,[87] the bridge is an open-air structure and thus decidedly not enclosed. At once part of the city and set apart from it, it forms a threshold between public and private, a sonically protected environment in which sociality flourishes. There, Dickens's characters enjoy intimacy without detaching from the larger environment and its multitude. Silent space, more broadly conceived, functions in much the same way throughout *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*.

While I suggest that a longing for private communication in the face of mediated networks raised the valuation of silence and extralinguistic interaction, silence in the period signifies (and offers) much more than mere privacy.[88] More important, silence and the intimacy it fosters among Dickens's characters are not contingent on private spaces such as the Victorian home. It is the liminal space between public and private that is so productive of social connection and growth in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. It isn't privacy, in the sense of being

[87] I argue for a conception of space as insulated rather than enclosed, because it implies a less certain, less complete separation from the world around.

[88] Because this project works to untangle silence from its prevailing associations with absence, aloofness, and antisociality, I position silence as crucially distinct from privacy, with its connotations of isolation and withdrawal. Peter Burke suggests that "silence itself could be an operational mode of conversation" (qtd. in Vincent *I Hope I Don't* 31), while Lauren Berlant connects intimacy to limited speech: "To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of elegance and brevity" (281).

isolated or shut away, that enables intimacy, but rather the presence of silence: the moderation of soundwaves, inhabiting a space that transcends the city's roar.

2 A Tale of Two Silences: Silence as Waystation in *Bleak House*

The sensory confusion that marks the opening pages of *Bleak House* has been central to studies of the novel over the years. Scholars from Ian Ousby to Jesse Taylor and Allen MacDuffie stress the novel's "disordered environment" (Ousby 382) and its significance for Dickens's many characters. Ousby links their "struggles to understand this…environment" and their attempts "to see the world clearly and to see it whole" to the larger motif of visual impediment (ibid). A range of studies on detection and detective work in *Bleak House* has also tended to privilege the visual over other sensory modes.[89] In a novel so overtly concerned with documents, handwriting, and literacy's connection to personhood, a focus on the visual realm is well founded; yet the novel's acoustic world proves equally important to Dickens's character and plot development. From the "worrying sound" of the Ghost's Walk (114) to the "loud report" that kills Mr. Tulkinghorn and sets up a "hum from the streets" (749), characters make sense of their environment and their relation to the world around by sound as much as sight. The fog of the opening pages and the snow of the climax have been understood as obstacles to *seeing*, but this section unpacks their relation to hearing (or, more importantly, to *not* hearing) by examining the role that such substances play in creating silent space.

[89] See, for example: Peter Thomas, "'The Narrow Track of Blood': Detection and Storytelling in *Bleak House*"; Eleanor Salotto, "Detecting Esther Summerson's Secrets: Dickens's Bleak House of Representation"; Judith Wilt, "Confusion and Consciousness in Dickens's Esther."

Ousby ultimately aligns clear vision with character development. With his reading, we can trace Esther Summerson's development across moments of increasing visual clarity, as her perceptual abilities grow closer to those of the novel's omniscient narrator (389). I argue that Esther's development may be traced across the novel's moments of environmental silence with equal efficacy. During her first encounter with London, for example, she finds it "in such a distracting state of confusion that [she] wondered how the people kept their senses, until we passed into sudden quietude under an old gateway, and drove on through a silent square" (42). Entering an "odd nook" in this silent square, she meets Ada and Richard—two figures that largely define her social sphere over the course of the novel. In this and other instances, silence counters *Bleak House*'s phenomenological condition of disorder, enabling reader and character to perceive more clearly and comprehensively, for however brief a space.

Esther begins to understand herself and her relation to others precisely when silence breaks through the chaos of the environment and quietens the static of the novel's buzzing social networks. As she observes about herself in her first chapter, "I had. . . a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better" (BH 28). Silent surroundings make this possible. The social intimacy and personal growth that manifest themselves in spaces of silence go some way toward rectifying *Bleak House*'s "physical muddle" and "loss of coherence, vitality and connection" (Ousby 382). While Esther develops across periodic experiences of silent intimacy, examining the interrelation between soundscape and social relatedness also offers fresh readings of characters such as Mr. Tulkinghorn and Sir Leicester Dedlock. Reading character development relative to silence and the social relatedness it enables thus facilitates a broader consideration of character growth in *Bleak House*.

Though silence plays a vital role in social relations, and through them, in personal development, it does not represent an unqualified good in *Bleak House*. Silence takes two main forms in the novel, each distinct in its relation to sociality. On the one hand, Dickens warns against the totalizing silence of Mr. Tulkinghorn—aligned, as he is, with the swallowing and stagnating silence of "noble Mausoleums" that hold secrets and return nothing (23). Such a silence aligns too readily with suppression and absence. Dickens's interest, instead, is in a more contrapuntal and strategic silence: a silence that restores balance to the soundscape. For silence to be creatively and socially productive in his novels, it must operate as a kind of waystation. Stretches of silence provide key spaces for characters to exchange, commune, and return to the chaos better equipped to face it. Back out in the stir and noise of life, they further hone the relations and capacities cultivated in silence. Developing characters utilize and benefit from silence; they do not *dwell* in it. Silence, for Dickens, is crucially discardable, but it is never discardable for good.

The distinction I draw between these two forms of silence in *Bleak House* is perhaps best illustrated by comparing the two forms of sonic insulation mentioned above: the fog that opens the novel and the snow that blankets its climax. As organic, blanketing substances with similar compositions, fog and snow would seem to be analogous entities. At the time of Dickens's writing, both were believed to significantly dampen sound: fog's impact on sound inspired an ongoing quest for more effective foghorns, while an 1868 article on "Sound" from *All the Year Round* notes that "falling snow has often been referred to, as offering a great hindrance to the passage of sound" (255). Yet while Dickens's depiction of the dense London fog that "creep[s],"

"hover[s]," "droop[s]," and "pinch[es]" (13) is decidedly negative,[90] the snow that brings a hush to the novel's climax plays a critical role in its form, plot, and character development. London's fog disorients, obstructs, and oppresses, but the falling snow opens up a space for, among other things, the novel's two narrators to finally join forces and tell the remainder of *Bleak House* in more unified tandem.

Why should one provide a space for growth, relatedness, and a merging of minds while the other obstructs progress and stifles life? The answer is deceptively simple. The snow stops falling. The silent spaces it creates serve narratorial and character needs, and then it disperses. London's fog, on the other hand—like the denseness of Chancery and the dampness of Chesney Wold—is a chronic condition. It is, as Mr. Guppy tells Esther, "a London particular" (42). Silence, for all its relative value, is not ideal as a permanent condition. It fosters interpersonal connection and generates personal growth, but characters must ultimately rejoin the realm of noise. Dickens maintains this careful distinction between a punctuating and socially productive silence and the stagnating silence of secrecy and tombs throughout *Bleak House*.

For Esther Summerson, new stages of maturation unfold in spaces of marked silence; these punctuations in the soundscape[91] function as key stops in her personal journey. As Ousby suggests, "the growth of Esther's understanding of herself and her past is one of [*Bleak House*'s] main movements" (389). A related aspect of Esther's development and of the novel's larger

[90] Fog is not the only sound-dampener related to Chancery Court; the various solicitors of the court stand in "a long matted well" (14). The fogginess, or density, of Chancery Court is—as far as Dickens is concerned—permanent and unalterable. It aligns with the silence of stagnation and the silence of Tulkinghorn.

[91] I borrow this notion from R. Murray Schafer. In *The Tuning of the World* (1977)—the study that inspired Picker's work on Victorian sound—Schafer insists that the punctuations of silence are an integral piece of any soundscape.

movement is the growth of social relatedness—a growth signified by moments of unusual quietness and stillness rather than "progressively clear vision" (389). Esther's arc is defined by her increasing social entwinedness, as she transforms from a lonely double for her staring doll to an integral node in a burgeoning network. John Frazee insists that "our understanding of *Bleak House* would be better served by an analysis that … treats [Esther's narrative] as part of the larger design of the novel" (228). Working in this vein, I read the silent "waystations" of Esther's personal journey as illustrative of the larger relationship between silence and social networking in *Bleak House*.

Esther's understanding of herself and her relation to society transforms over the course of her narrative. The first hint at silence's role in this process comes during a revelatory exchange between Esther and her godmother, Miss Barbary. Esther's desire to know something, anything, of her own mother comes to a head as she sits with her godmother in their nearly silent home. Esther recalls, "the clock ticked, the fire clicked; not another sound had been heard in the room, or in the house, for I don't know how long" (29). Their exchange, too, opens without a sound, through an exchange of looks. Esther looks inquiringly at her aunt and reads, in answer, "It would have been far better, little Esther … that you had never been born" (30). Their dialogue ends with the (spoken) proclamation that Esther's mother is her disgrace, just as Esther was her mother's. This encounter, born out of an almost unnatural stillness, contains Barbary's only overt reference to that missing and most desired link in Esther's life—that of kinship, parentage—and it informs Esther's self-conception for many pages to come.

While the encounter is far from pleasant, it is positive in another sense of the term: It produces a major shift in Esther's conception of herself and her relation to the society around

her. Before this evening, she has little sense of her location within a social network. Mrs. Rachael answers all of her inquiries about parentage by withdrawing from the room (29); Esther knows none of her school fellows "at home" and cannot identify the "separation" between herself and them (29); and even her faithful doll stares "not so much at [her] … as at *nothing*" (27-8, emphasis mine). Barbary's declaration of mutual disgrace signifies both identity and relation; a fragment of personal identity now exists where only oblivion, separation, and nothingness existed before, and Esther shapes herself around this solitary piece of knowledge. It informs her expectations, actions, and relationships until future "stops" add new depths to her self-awareness.

Another glimpse of the interplay between Esther's developing sociality and her relationship with silence comes during the formative period of her illness and recovery. Esther's illness unfolds during a relative silence, a pause in the usual chatter and bustle of Bleak House and a lull in the novel's plot. Confined to the sickroom, Charley and Esther exist in a space apart from the rest: "everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance" (555). It is during this period that Esther imagines "a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which [*she*] was one of the beads!" (556, emphasis original). Though she prays "to be taken off from the rest" and finds it "inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing," the vision reflects her deepening sense of integration into a social network. Her existence is now one in a string of lives that are entangled with and inextricable from one another.[92] While this social

[92] Ousby reads this period of illness similarly, as a "pure culture" in which Esther can "work out the problem of her relation with Lady Dedlock" (390). With his reading, "the idea of the necklace and its component beads … suggest the notion of vital interrelation implied by the denouement of the Esther Summerson-Lady Dedlock plot" (391).

embeddedness brings Esther much pain, such bonds are ever formative. Looking back on this vision of her social entanglement, Esther Woodcourt is not "the least unhappy in remembering" (556). This silent period does not suspend Esther's connection to others; rather, it crystalizes her conception of what it means to be *related*. She later interprets "the stillness in the house" during her recovery not as absence or emotional distance, but rather as "thoughtfulness … on the part of all those who had always been so good to [her]" (557). It is a silence defined by consideration and relatedness—by a knowledge of the other and a desire to provide what is needed.

Esther and Lady Dedlock's meeting in the "still woods" near Chesney Wold (579) represents the penultimate event in the sonic mapping of character development that this section undertakes.[93] In *Supposing Bleak House*, John O. Jordan reads this interview between Esther and her birthmother as a scene of rejection and betrayal. He deems it a "failed reunion scene" (13)—a necessary yet regrettable foreclosure of their relationship. Their interview may foreclose the possibility of future meetings, but it contains more than meets the ear and is anything *but* a failure. Enveloped "in the silence of a summer day" (579), Esther comes to terms with the absence around which she has shaped and defined herself, making it possible to claim an identity all her own and direct her attention to other key nodes in her social network.

The two women cross paths at Esther's "favorite spot," a place of tranquil stillness set in opposition to the Ghost's Walk and its worrying sound (576). When Lady Dedlock approaches, Esther sees "something in her face that [she] had pined for and dreamed of when [she] was a little child; something [she] had never seen in any face" (578). She gains an indefinable sense of

[93] By "sonic mapping of character development" I mean: using the novel's soundscape—i.e. Dickens's depiction of the relative loudness and quietness of the setting—to trace character developments.

relation for which she has long been pining before the first word is spoken. Indeed, dialogue is not the most significant aspect of this encounter; the most important things to unfold in their meeting do so through touch, glance, and presence, and speech often proves inadequate. Esther's words are "broken" and "incoherent" (579),[94] and she omits—even as a backward-looking narrator—to articulate the thoughts that filled her mind. Her retelling also contains frequent transitions into indirect speech, enhancing the hushed nature of the scene.[95]

Their relatedness in this moment represents growth in each woman, a development in each character. Lady Dedlock calls these rare moments of transparency with Esther "the only natural moments of her life" and tells Esther, "if you hear of Lady Dedlock … Think that the reality is in her suffering … in her murdering within her breast the only love and truth of which she is capable"—namely, in her relation to Esther (582). Esther, meanwhile, contrasts her place in the world before their meeting with her place in the world after: "So strangely did I hold my place in this world, that, until within a short time back, I had never, to my own mother's knowledge, breathed—had been buried—had never been endowed with life—had never borne a name" (583). The shared knowledge that Esther *had* breathed, *had* been endowed with life, and *had* borne a name forces Esther to face, and to accept, her own identity. Regardless of any future meetings—or the lack thereof—she does not hold her place in the world so strangely now. Her social embeddedness reaches a new level as she realizes, after this encounter, that she "could not disentangle all that was about [her]" (584).

---

[94] Wolfreys suggests, too, that "*Bleak House* teaches us to read for what is not spoken directly or out loud" (145).
[95] Wolfreys argues that the heavy use of indirect speech contributes to *Bleak House*'s "muted" resonances (139).

Taking Esther's experiences as representative of a broader trend in *Bleak House*, the growth and deepening of social relatedness often occurs, counterintuitively, in crucial spaces of silence. Esther asserts at the opening of her narrative that while she "ha[s] not by any means a quick understanding," when she "love[s] a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten" (28). As she says more succinctly on the next page, "my comprehension is quickened when my affection is" (29). While it's unsurprising that social relations inform personal development—for Esther, certainly, but also for the figures such as Lady and Sir Leicester Dedlock—what is unique in Dickens's novel are the environmental conditions under which this formative social engagement transpires. Silent spaces such as the Barbary home, the sickroom, and the woods near Chesney Wold make the strengthening of social relations possible. Esther gains clarity, comprehension, a greater understanding of herself in relation to the world around her through the strengthening of these bonds.

Any discussion of silence and character development in *Bleak House* must ultimately grapple with Tulkinghorn, the embodiment of that alternative species of silence. Tulkinghorn's relation to silence provides a clear contrast to Esther's. While Esther utilizes silent places as waystations for social development and intimate exchange, she willingly rejoins the chaos of everyday life. Tulkinghorn dwells indefinitely in silence: "noble Mausoleums rooted for centuries in retired glades of parks … hold fewer noble secrets than walk abroad among men, shut up in the breast of Mr. Tulkinghorn" (23). "Rooted," "retired," and perpetually "shut up," he stands in opposition to the vitality, exchange, and budding sociality that mark Esther's maturation. His disinclination for social connection—he is "without attachment" (581)—gives his use of silence a sinister edge:

it is purely a means of withholding. Like a black hole, he absorbs fragments of the social world around him and gives nothing back. As Wolfreys notes, "Tulkinghorn takes quietude to an entirely different level from Esther…there is to [him] an essential solitude" (142).

While Esther's relationship with silence indicates how it can contribute to social and personal growth, Tulkinghorn's association with it is inextricable from his association with the grave. Lingering at the fringes of the social world, "at corners of dinner-tables" and "near doors of drawing-rooms" (24), Tulkinghorn "receives [others'] salutations with gravity, and buries them along with the rest of his knowledge" (ibid). He never relinquishes the silence that he wields; nor does he ever *share* his silence with another, as Esther, Lady Dedlock, and other characters do.[96] He does not enjoy silence in company, but rather *in spite of* company. The solitary and unending nature of the silence from which he draws his power precludes any chance of social communion, exchange, or growth. Instead of drawing what he needs from silence and carrying on, he carries silence with him through life, making every space he occupies a silent one.

Silence's ultimate triumph in *Bleak House*—facilitating the social events of the climax and bringing its divergent narrators into a unified telling—takes place after this other, darker mode of silence leaves the stage. It is Tulkinghorn's very style of silence, the absence of any social inflection in his silence, that ushers in his death. On that night, his separation from the rest of London figures sonically, as "every noise is merged, this moonlight night, into a distant ringing hum, as if the city were a vast glass, vibrating" (749). London, the sum of a collection of sounds, assumes one unified form—underneath which and apart from which lies Tulkinghorn, shot

[96] Lady Dedlock aptly describes Tulkinghorn's modus operandi when she tells Esther: "His calling is the acquisition of secrets, and the holding possession of such power as they give him, with no sharer or opponent in it" (581).

through the heart by a woman from whom he dredged up information and to whom he gave nothing back. In his death, Tulkinghorn's silence becomes the silence of the grave that it so closely resembled, and another kind of silence takes center stage.

3 A Hush Falls Over the Narrative, or A Meeting of Minds

An extraordinary thing happens during the climactic scenes of Dickens's *Bleak House*. Dickens does something he's never done in the preceding pages and will never do again: he brings his omniscient narrator and his first-person narrator into the same house at the same time. For a few brief moments the novel's disparate narrators share the corridors of Bleak House. Why? What does this curiously understated meeting signify? And, more importantly, how can it happen without destroying the novel's narrative integrity? In this section I examine *Bleak House*'s climactic scenes as a kind of architectural space—a corridor, set apart from the rest of the narrative. I argue that much *of Bleak House*'s rising action and climax transpire in a silent realm, facilitated by the falling snow to which the narrators draw so much attention.[97] Akin to Esther and Charley's sickroom in Bleak House, it is a silent space in which social development unexpectedly flourishes. Esther herself seems to conceive of this narrative stretch in architectural terms; she closes it by asserting (twice) that she will now "proceed to other passages of [her] narrative" (916). While "other passages" might refer to the passages of text she

[97] So far I have emphasized silence's potential to punctuate. I have further suggested that the possibility of a productive silence—a silence that provides something for its participants, from clarity and personal growth to social connectedness—*depends* on its operation as a kind of waystation, a place to come and go from with relative ease. This proves no different in the context of *Bleak House*'s oddly stretched and intermittent climax. In the best-case scenario, silent space can be used and discarded at will. Dickens uses silence in just such a way as his novel churns through the snow toward Esther's mother, "cold and dead" (915). It creates an opening in the midst of the roar for the merging of perspectives and the expansion of minds, and it lifts away as easily as snow melts.

is writing, it has greater resonance with the multifarious passages of Bleak House—the setting and center point for much of her narrative.

I suggest that the rising action of *Bleak House* begins with Inspector Bucket and Esther's "Pursuit" of Lady Dedlock (Chapter 56) and climaxes with Lady Dedlock lying on the graveyard steps, cold and dead (Chapter 59). Dickens uses this hushed narrative space[98] to push narration and character development in experimental new ways. Elongated and unevenly paced as this section may be, it contains the novel's emotional and formal high points: Lady Dedlock becomes truly and publicly known, in all her shame, while Esther makes a doomed attempt to redeem her for this life; Sir Leicester Dedlock becomes a sympathetic character at the eleventh hour; omniscient and first-person narrator collaborate on a unified narrative. Minds seem to merge and disparate social networks coalesce. These events coincide with the omniscient narrator's marked attention to silence and silence-producing elements in the physical environment, highlighting their role in the developing social communion.

As Lady Dedlock flees and Sir Leicester suffers a stroke, it begins to snow in London. Falling snow is a persistent presence as Bucket and Esther search for Lady Dedlock and as Sir Leicester listens for her footstep, and it is primarily this snow that envelops and insulates *Bleak House*'s climactic events. Dickens's omniscient narrator travels through the snow and into Bleak House with Bucket, and as John Jarndyce rouses the sleeping Esther two narrative worlds converge. For one scene, both narrators reside under the same roof. Though Esther does not

[98] Sound-deadening snow falls and straw muffles the noise of carriage wheels, while Sir Leicester sits in his room, struck silent: "Sir Leicester…looks out again at the falling sleet and snow, and listens again for the returning steps. A quantity of straw has been tumbled down in the street to deaden the noises there, and she might be driven to the door perhaps without his hearing wheels" (892).

speak or appear in these moments, her physical proximity to the omniscient narrator indicates a convergence of their narrative threads—which will center on Lady Dedlock's fate—and a final stage in her perception and social development. The narratives can converge *because* Esther knows her relation to Lady Dedlock and is now embedded in the novel's larger social network.

The narrators soon leave Bleak House, but they tell the events that follow in tandem—often *re*covering the same stretch of time from different locations. While the pace of events quickens, the *telling* of these events slows. The hush of the soundscape contributes to this tension in narrative pace: where one might expect a crescendo in sound as well as action, there is instead the silence of falling snow. In moments when it seems as though the narrative pace *should* quicken, the omniscient narrator emphasizes a reigning silence. Straw blankets the streets near the Dedlock townhouse "to deaden the noises there," and Sir Leicester, among other characters, "listen[s] to the intense silence" (892, 897). Much like Lady Dedlock and Esther's meeting in the silent woods, the real payoff of these scenes can't be found in what's overtly said or done. It isn't the physical rush after Lady Dedlock that matters most. The real work of Dickens's climax is emotional work—the personal growth and social intimacy sparked in multiple characters by Lady Dedlock's flight—and such things are best observed when the world around you (or perhaps the text) quietens down.

If the heaviness of the snowfall is any indication of its silence-producing powers—and for Victorians, who believed that the individual particles of snow materially interfered with sound waves, it certainly would be—Esther's mention of "air…so thick with the darkness of the day and the density of the fall, that we could see but a very little way in any direction" (880) points to a high level of dampening. Her observation also makes it apparent that *vision* will not lead them to

her lost mother. Despite all of the allusions to Bucket's sharp sight and "watchful…face" (881), it is the pause in the city's roar, the space for clear thinking and human connection created by such snow-boundedness, that leads Bucket to Lady Dedlock and Sir Leicester to the revelation that the life is about more than station or honor. The great irony of Bucket's sweeping vision from the "high tower in his mind" is its implication that vision will lead him astray. As the omniscient narrator so slyly says, "there is a lonely figure…cast out, it would seem, from all companionship. It is the figure of a woman, too; but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came from the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion" (864). Chasing Lady Dedlock's appearance leads Bucket and Esther miles off the trail. Instead, they must listen for omissions—what the bricklayer *isn't* saying—and Sir Leicester must make peace with the footsteps he will never hear again.

Much as the perspectives of *Bleak House*'s two narrators begin to meld, the minds of several of Dickens's characters seem to merge during this climactic stretch. The highest concentration of silence at this stage of the novel centers around the Dedlock townhouse, impassive from the outside and "hushed" within (888). As Esther and Bucket churn through the heavy snow, Sir Leicester watches it fall in silence. The baronet watches the snow from his bedroom window, and "upon the least noise in the house, which is kept hushed, his hand is at the pencil" (888)—a pencil, because he has lost the power of speech. Literally struck silent by a stroke, he turns to other forms of communication. Beyond the overt references to silence in these chapters, the narrator's heavy use of indirect speech further tips the balance of the soundscape in its favor. But as these chapters reveal, silence is far from empty. It is laden with

emotional, cognitive, and even semantic content: "In the ears of [Mrs. Rouncewell]," to take one example, "the silence is fraught with echoes of her own words" (890). Sir Leicester's induced silence and extraverbal communication kindle an intimacy between him and other figures in the narrative that scarcely seemed possible before.

The most striking element of the scenes that follow Sir Leicester's stroke is the apparent ability of a close circle of characters to read one another's minds; speech and even the written word become superfluous. Sir Leicester need only turn to his slate and his housekeeper, Mrs. Rouncewell, "*knows* what he would write" (888). While Mrs. Rouncewell is the first and arguably the primary figure to interpret Sir Leicester's silent signing, the most impressive display of interpretation comes from Inspector Bucket, who enters the sickroom and plunges directly into a remarkable conversation. While it reads as indirect speech run rampant, the dialogue reaches beyond that, because much of the reported speech is never actually spoken. Bucket and Dedlock communicate with eyes, with fingers, in all manner of extralinguistic ways—as when "with one hook of his finger … [Bucket] indicates, 'Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, I understand you'" (859)—and the conversation never wavers.

Sir Leicester's slate comes into requisition once, but the statement he writes is brief and incomplete, "Full forgiveness. Find—" (859), and only finds embellishment in Bucket's mind. He closes their encounter with a dizzying display of inference:

> …he follows Sir Leicester Dedlock's look towards a little box upon a table. 'Bring it here, Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet? Certainly. Open it with one of these here keys? Certainly. The littlest key? *To* be sure. Take the notes out? So I will. Count 'em? That's soon done…Take 'em for expenses? That I'll do, and render an account of course. Don't spare money? No, I won't.' The velocity and certainty of Mr Bucket's interpretation on all these heads is a little short of miraculous. Mrs Rouncewell…is giddy with the swiftness of his eyes and hands, as he starts up, furnished for his journey. (859-60, emphasis original)

In this dialogue and others like it, Dickens contends that the human body converses even when silent. Further, a conversation so governed by the extralinguistic rises above interruption, interception, and interpolation; even the intuitive Mrs. Rouncewell is at a loss.

Sir Leicester's exchange with Bucket brings an almost telepathic mode of communication to the forefront. Meanwhile, his interactions with Mrs. Rouncewell and George position silence as an intimate rather than alienating condition. The intercourse between him and George begins verbally, as Dedlock slowly recovers some power of speech, but stretches of silence foster their deepening relationship. After an attempt to speak tires Sir Leicester, "George, with a look of assent and sympathy, makes another bow. The different times when they were both young men…and looked at one another down at Chesney Wold, arise before them both, and soften both" (894). As the narrator observes, "the trooper has become…necessary to him. Nothing has been said, but it is quite understood" (896).

The post-stroke exchanges between Sir Leicester and his companions present some of the most compelling evidence that silence performs a social function in *Bleak House*. The omniscient narrator discredits Sir Leicester's power of speech just after he suffers the stroke, noting that he had "so long been thoroughly persuaded of the weight and import to mankind of any word he said, that his words really had come to sound as if there were something in them" (858). This allusion to the emptiness of his words suggests that speech actually impedes authentic interaction and obscures depth of character in such a figure, especially considering the reshaping of character produced by his foray into silence. When Sir Leicester's speech resumes, relatedness and compassion give it newfound weight:

> His formal array of words might have at any other time, as it has often had, something ludicrous in it; but at this time it is serious and affecting. His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of [Lady Dedlock], his generous conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake, are simply honorable, manly, and true. (895)

While his "formal array of words" threatens to become "ludicrous"—recalling the inadequacy of his often empty speech—the sentiment he imparts is nevertheless impactful and earnest. In expressing the simple true feeling he has cultivated over the preceding pages, Sir Leicester transcends both his power of speech and his social position. In this formative period, he has experienced intimacies across class and gender boundaries, forged relationships across that bound, and stepped out of the box into which he used to fit so easily.

Silence enables unprecedented intimacy and unexpected character growth for Sir Leicester Dedlock, serving a valuable social function for all characters involved, but it threatens to outlive its usefulness for the baronet. He clings to a silence that is no longer shared or social. Instead of boarding the train back to the noise and bustle of life, he turns toward the grave: New days now come "like a phantom. Cold, colorless, and vague, [the day] sends a warning streak before it of a deathlike hue" (900). Dedlock's existence becomes "deathlike" for the rest of the novel. With one foot in the grave, he subsumes the associations with living death and dead silence that Dickens had put to rest with Tulkinghorn. His encounters with silence produce a social growth akin to Esther's, but he lacks her willingness to come and go from silent space—to rejoin the bustle of the living.

Unlike Sir Leicester, Esther continues to use silent space for social and productive means. Her near brush with the omniscient narrator and her journey with Bucket signify an ultimate step in

her development as narrator and character. She shares space—the same plane, if you will—with two figures characterized by a preternatural knowingness, and she completes a literal and symbolic journey toward the most significant event of her life. As Esther recognizes her mother's body "cold and dead" (915), a chapter of her life and of her identity closes—one that began in intense alienation and ends with intimacy that goes beyond words. Esther closes her narration of this event with a silence that mirrors the one she keeps regarding her mother's letter. The reader is privy to her thoughts and emotions regarding the body until precisely the moment that she recognizes it as her mother's (and, in some ways, her *own*):

> She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature. She…who could give me the only clue to where my mother was; she, who was to guide us to rescue and save her whom we had sought so far…she lay there, and they stopped me! I saw, but did not comprehend, the solemn and compassionate look in Mr Woodcourt's face…I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead. (915)

The chapter ends with this matter-fact-statement. Terse and curiously empty of emotional content, the staccato of "cold and dead" seems to echo on, but Esther does not address her loss in the next chapter. Her response to this event belongs to the unnarratable and intimate space between daughter and mother.

Instead of providing any glimpse of her interiority, Esther opens the next chapter—aptly titled "Perspective"—with a spatial metaphor that signals her ability to move beyond what has happened. She will not linger with Sir Leicester in the hushed climax. More than anyone else in *Bleak House*, Esther is aware of the value and the limitations of silent space: she "proceed[s] to other passages" (916). It is no coincidence that her "feverish wandering journey" with Bucket ultimately brings her to Woodcourt, a signifier of her maturation into the Esther Woodcourt who

tells her tale. The remainder of her narrative attends to the noisy bustle of this new phase of life. Silence nurtures Esther through multiple stages of growth—producing a clarity and ultimately a peace about her origins that enables her to form more intimate relationships—and it enables a merging of minds among characters and a unification of narratorial perspectives. Nevertheless, Dickens's narrative maintains that sound and silence should exist in balance. Capacities developed in silence must be further honed in the kinds of encounters and interactions that take place outside its bounds; the intimacy and social embeddedness it facilitates for characters like Esther and Sir Leicester are of little use if they never reengage with the larger social body.

While the silent spaces in *Bleak House* are largely produced by natural means, from snow and fog to wooded land and bodily ailment, *Little Dorrit* represents silent space as a manmade and more permanent feature of the cityscape. Dickens's depictions of acoustically insulated structures such as the Iron Bridge and the Marshalsea Prison further highlight silence's value in the Dickensian city. Each location represents a deliberately constructed space for characters to seek silence and gives rise to strikingly public encounters with it.

4 Silence in the City: Intimate Space & Acoustic Insulation in *Little Dorrit*

Dickens's number plan for Chapter XXI of *Little Dorrit*, "Mr Merdle's Complaint," opens with an intriguing note: "People like the houses they Inhabit—Suppose a dinner party of houses" (875). In addition to exploring this resemblance between residents and their residences, Dickens's 1857 novel attends to the larger relationship between social encounters and the environments they take place within. Consider the impact of Hampton Court's thin walls on the quality of dinner

parties held there, as "visitors, with their heads against a partition of thin canvas and a page and a young female at high words on the other side, ma[ke] believe to be sitting in a primeval silence" (331). This and other such scenes evince Dickens's deepening interest in the interrelations among intimate space, acoustic environment, and human sociality. What is unique in his depiction of intimate space, however, is his implication that it can exist outside the confines of the *private* residence. In *Privacy: A Short History*, Vincent notes that Victorian conceptions of intimacy generally centered on domestic space, privileging the "enclosed home" as a site for connection and communication (53). Yet many of *Little Dorrit*'s most important social and romantic developments occur on the Iron Bridge and in the Marshalsea Prison, both of which straddle the line between public and private.

Dickens was not alone in his attention to the impact of acoustic insulation (or the lack thereof) on social relations—to the "interdependence," for example, "[between] protected communication and the built environment" (Vincent *I Hope* 33). Architects of the period stress the importance of pugged floors[99] and battened walls in domestic space, particularly in one room crucial to the social life of an English home: the dining room. The May 1835 issue of J. C. Loudon's *Architectural Magazine, and Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, and Furnishing, and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith*—a publication intended for instruction of the many—contains an article by architect I. J. Kent on "The Dining Room." One installation in a larger series called "The Dwelling-Rooms of a House," Kent's discussion of the

[99] In a "pugged" floor, the space beneath the floor (or between flooring and ceiling) is filled with material such as clay, sawdust, and sand to reduce the transmission of sound. In Scottish construction this practice is referred to as "ash-deafening."

ideal dining room is remarkable for its seemingly paradoxical emphases on social interaction and sound reduction.

In a June 1835 follow-up to his original article, Kent paints a picture of the room's utility for "a numerous and educated class of society, who…do not mix with their family or private friends until dinner time; and who then, perhaps, being surrounded by their domestic circle only, or an intimate friend or two, may be disposed to pass the remainder of the evening in the same room" (276). The sociability that Kent envisions in such a room is made possible by the sound attenuation techniques that he stresses in the original article. "This room should be quiet," he notes, "and unconnected with any other except a library or store-room…The floor of this room, as of all good rooms," he continues, "should be pugged to destroy sound" (229). Kent also recommends the use of Turkey carpets and insists that "there should be double doors to every doorway" (230). Double doors were valuable in their capacity to "exclud[e] noise," as architect William Cole explains in his "Designs and Description of a Double Door for a Room, so contrived that one Door cannot be opened until the other is quite closed"—an article that appears in the same May 1835 issue.

Robert Kerr takes a similar position on dining rooms and double doors in his 1864 publication, *The Gentleman's House; Or, How to Plan English Residences, From the Parsonage to the Palace; with tables of accommodation, and cost, and a series of selected plans*. Kerr uses his preface to assert the larger significance of spatial planning for the welfare of English society. He deems a "gentleman-like Residence" a matter of "design" rather than scale or expense and considers "quiet comfort for his family and guests" among an Englishman's highest priorities (73). His chapter on the dining room follows Loudon's example in positing that "double doors

must of course be provided" if the room has any doors of communication with other chambers (108)—an arrangement he does not recommend, because this important room ought to have "a certain sort of retirement" (101).

If the wall between dining room and storeroom was threatening enough to dinnertime sociality, exterior walls and party walls[100]—and beyond those, public space—were even more concerning entities. The same Londoners who scorned Parisian apartment buildings often lived in partitioned or, at the very least, terraced housing (Marcus 88). A foray into the Abridgement Class books for 1855-1876 reveals a number of patents pertaining to architectural sound attenuation—or "sound-deadening"—on a larger scale. Notable patents for sound-deadening walls appear in 1857, 1860, 1863, and 1865 in the Abridgement Class book for "Buildings Etc." The Abridgement Class book on "Cements Etc." contains two patents for "sound-deadening coverings" in 1856 alone: F. Haines recommends cork to "deaden sound" and "reduce vibration" in factories and other industrial spaces, while W. Brindley suggests the use of "papier mâché…for roofing, partitioning, floorclothes, sound-deadening, &c." Such techniques were also relevant for more rural environs and outdoor space. Architect Lewis Vulliamy writes of thin layers of gutta-percha used to deaden sound at railway bridges (Vulliamy Papers).

In *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*, Sharon Marcus argues that "space, often relegated in philosophical discourse to the status of a passive background, [is] a fully historical and political dimension" (5). She highlights the "extent to which nineteenth-century discourses shifted the terms of Englishness from men's enjoyment of

[100] A "party wall" refers to a wall that divides two different residences—for example, in apartment buildings or terraced housing.

political liberties (keeping authorities out) to their engrossment in an impregnable space (keeping themselves in)" (91). The rest of this chapter uses a sound-sensitive reading of *Little Dorrit* to argue that characters' apparent impulse to withdraw (into intimate space; into silence) reflects London's increasingly imbalanced soundscape and is anything but antisocial in nature—as indicated by Dickens's use of sonically insulated semi-public spaces. Instead, Victorian concerns about ever-increasing urban noise reflect a commitment to intimate connections and a recognition that excessive sound erodes the fabric of social life. Despite Dickens's appreciable ambivalence about silence and its association with the grave, among other things, *Little Dorrit* makes his interest in acoustic insulation and its role in sociality unmistakably clear.

In a novel so concerned with the randomized and proliferating social contact of modern life that it forfeits a traditional plotline,[101] the developing relationship between Little (Amy) Dorrit and Arthur Clennam represents a stable center point.[102] This key relationship, representative of intimate relationships more broadly, owes its development to the silence-producing capacities of Victorian architecture. *Little Dorrit* contains two main structures that offer quietude in the midst of the urban environment: the Iron Bridge and the Marshalsea Prison. While spaces of silence

[101] In his opening number plan for the novel, Dickens explains his intention: "People to meet and part as travelers do, and the future connexion between them in the story, not to be now shewn to the reader but to be worked out as in life. Try this uncertainty and this not-putting of them together, as a new means of interest" (864). This seemingly-random pulling apart and putting together of characters dominates the novel and trumps traditional plot structure. In the narrative, Miss Wade espouses a fatalistic conception of human relations marked by attention to long-distance transportation: "In our course through life we shall meet the people who are coming to meet *us*, from many strange places and by many strange roads…and what it is set to us to do to them, and what it is set to them to do to us, will all be done" (39); "you may be sure that there are men and women already on their road, who have their business to do with *you*, and will do it…They may be coming hundreds, thousands, of miles over the sea" (40).
[102] Rosenthal similarly argues that an "implied social network…gives the novel its coherence and drive" (288-9).

emerge irregularly in *Bleak House*, this novel's more permanent sources of silence ensure that it can be—and *is*—wittingly sought out by Dickens's characters. In these acoustically insulated spaces—marked by stillness, suspension, a "pause…to the roar" (555)—sociality flourishes and intimacy grows. Such a reading of the Marshalsea runs the risk of sentimentalizing a site of enforced confinement and degradation, but the prison's unique acoustic properties and its pattern of productivity—producing silence and enabling key social relations—add an important strand to any discussion of it. As my readings show, the prison—like the Iron Bridge—is largely insulated from the noise of London.

Part II of this chapter contains two clusters of readings: First, I examine social encounters on the sound-buffering Iron Bridge—tracing, especially, the encounters through which Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam develop an increasingly intimate relationship. Next, I examine evidence of acoustic insulation and surprising sociality in the Marshalsea Prison. William Dorrit provides a case study for the disintegration of social ties amid the noise and chaos of the outside world, while Little Dorrit and Arthur finally acknowledge the bond between themselves within the walls of the old Marshalsea.

A Note Before Proceeding

Dickens's interest in the social potential of silence was reflected in his political commitments as well as his personal practices. The beginning of this chapter refers to modifications Dickens made to his home and study to protect his writing process from outside noise, but a brief consideration of his stance on prison practices reveals that his concern with silence extended beyond the home. Keenly interested in prison reform, Dickens toured numerous prisons during his 1842 trip

to America—an endeavor that brought him into contact with the various "silent systems" in use in the States. A footnote in the Pilgrim Edition of his letters highlights his admiration of the "Auburn" or "Silent *Associated*" system practiced at Auburn State Prison in Cayuga County, New York (FN 3, p. 105, emphasis mine). The system entailed "congregate work by day and separation by night, with silence enforced by severe corporal discipline," and Dickens was "unusual [among travelers] in preferring it to the Philadelphia Separate system" (ibid). Dickens's distaste for a system defined by *solitary* silence[103] and his admiration for one characterized by silent *association*—communal work carried out in silence—suggests that it was not necessarily the silence of the Philadelphia system that troubled him but rather the intense solitude. Dickens even defends silent practices in an 1849 letter to Douglas Jerrold, where he writes, "I can remember very well, when the silent system was objected to as mysterious, and opposed to the genius of English Society. Yet there is no question that it has been a great benefit" (17 November 1849).

5 The Trouble with Noise: London Life & Aural Anxiety

Dickens's attention to the soundscape and its impact on social relations emerges in *Bleak House*, but his depiction of architectural spaces, their associated acoustics, and the role of silence in the urban environment comes to a head in his later work. Dickens is quick to position noise as a facet of *Little Dorrit*'s darkly modern world that exacerbates the already randomized, proliferating, and increasingly shallow nature of its human relations. As Arthur Clennam tells Mr. Meagles after a

[103] Namely, the Philadelphia Separate System, which was infamous for bringing prisoners to death and madness.

"silent turn backward and forward" on the final morning of their Marseilles quarantine, "I have had so much pleasure in your society, [and] may never in this labyrinth of a world exchange a quiet word with you again" (31, 33-4). While the quiet time spent in quarantine together initiates a lasting bond between Clennam and Meagles, the modern technologies so often discussed in scholarship on Victorian social networks prove little more than a menace. Railways and steamships bring strangers hither and thither, "journeying by land and journeying by sea, coming and going so strangely, to meet and to act and re-act on one another" (195), and the clattering Mails[104] threaten "to tear [Englishmen] limb from limb" (178).

The problem of noise arises as soon as main character Arthur Clennam returns to London from the East, a hemisphere associated philosophically with greater contemplation and appreciation of silence.[105] His first day in London brings aural agony:

> Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick and mortar echoes hideous…In every thoroughfare, up almost every alley, and down almost every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling, as if the Plague were in the city and the dead-carts were going round. (43)

Arthur's fraught relationship with church bells stems from his repressive upbringing, but this visceral depiction of London's bells suggests that there is more at play than a distaste for religion. Attention to dissonance, pitch—which is "sharp" or "flat," but never on-key—and "hideous" echo precedes a reference to "the Plague" and its "dead-carts" (43). For many

---

[104] While the postal service was far from new in the nineteenth century, its newly impressive speed and efficiency was an advancement owing to the nineteenth-century postal reform discussed by Menke, among others.

[105] In *Silence: A Christian History*, Diarmaid MacCulloch argues that Christianity's increasingly positive perception of silence reflects the influence of eastern cultures and philosophies (Greek philosophy and the Islamic faith, among others): "the vocabulary and practice of silence were so all-pervasive in the Hellenistic world that it was only natural they should remain strong in Catholic as well as gnostic Christianity" (61).

Londoners, noise was the very plague of their lives.[106] Aural agitation was sometimes a precursor to death, complicating, in the case of Dickens's good friend and illustrator John Leech, an extant heart condition.[107] The narrator's depiction of these daily bells as "maddening," "cracked," "throbbing," and "jerking" indicate a people perpetually facing aural overload—as overtaxed by sensory stimulation as they are overworked.

Clennam housekeeper Affery Flintwinch expresses this society-wide aural taxation even more explicitly. Fixated on the indefinable and unlocatable noises that haunt the Clennam house, she totters on the brink of mental insanity. The bolting, barring, cushioning, and carpeting methods practiced by other Londoners are of no use for Affery; noise assaults her from within and without. Dickens's narrator highlights the home's poor insulation, whereby "street noises, the rumbling of wheels in the lane merely rushed in at the gateway in going past and rushed out again: making the listening Mistress Affery feel as if she were deaf, and recovered the sense of hearing by instantaneous flashes. So with whistling, singing, talking, laughing, and all pleasant human sounds. They leaped the gap in a moment…" (195). The "human sounds" that rush in and out may be pleasant, but the home's complete permeability to sound is troubling nonetheless. As Affery tells Arthur toward the end of the narrative, "there never was such a house for noises. I shall die of 'em, if Jeremiah don't strangle me first" (720).

---

[106] A humorous excerpt from one of Dickens's letters to Jane Carlyle makes it clear that the novelist was familiar with Thomas Carlyle's intense aversion to noise. Dickens writes, "I send Carlyle herewith, my love, a large Newfoundland dog, a blood-hound whose bay is very fine, three Cochin China cocks and thirteen hens, and a Cockatoo. When you want the Cockatoo to scream louder than he always does, please aggravate him with a red handkerchief, but I hope you will find his natural noise sufficient—particularly as he is always pleased when the dogs fight, and they generally fight all day. They only howl at night." (Charles Dickens to Mrs. Carlyle; 9 March 1854)

[107] On the next page Arthur explicitly wonders "how many sick people [one of the neighboring bells] might be the death of in the course of a year" (44).

Dickens's emphasis on London's loudness—another "London particular,"[108] it would seem—brings the urban spaces that offer silence and, thus, a more privileged realm for human connection, into relief. Dickens's use of contrast makes it possible to pinpoint these spaces of sonic suspension. Namely, to identify sudden drops in sound—the foil to Affery's "instantaneous flashes" of hearing (195)—and the locations in which they occur. Baumgarten claims that "the experience of Dickens's London defies mapping in space and time…precisely when such coding becomes necessary" (142), yet if we filter through London's soundscape in this way, three spaces stand apart from the rest of London's geography.[109] Sonically speaking, the Iron Bridge is, as mentioned earlier, "as quiet … as though it had been open country" (Dickens 111). So too the Marshalsea Prison: "After a momentary whirl in the [prison's] outer courtyard," Mrs. Clennam finds herself in the lodge, "which seemed by contrast with the outer noise a place of refuge and peace" (821).

The third space, which gives the title to this chapter though it figures only in passing, is the terrace where Arthur overhears Miss Wade and Rigaud (aka Blandois) transacting their business. According to the narrator, "There is always, to this day, a sudden pause in that place to the roar of the great thoroughfare. The many sounds become so deadened that the change is like putting cotton in the ears or having the head thickly muffled" (555-6). This analogy recalls a metaphor in *Bleak House*, used for very different means, and offers a sense of progression from that novel to this. In *Bleak House*, Dickens's omniscient narrator claims that the "evil of [the

[108] Reference to Mr. Guppy's comment about the London fog, *Bleak House* 42.
[109] Baumgarten does note "the implicit critique of juxtaposed locations" such as Bleeding Heart Yard and the Clennam house (229), but he doesn't connect this juxtaposition explicitly to acoustics.

world of fashion] is that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweler's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds" (20). A head muffled in cotton and wool, then, is a head that prefers to ignore the realities and the troubles of the world around it. In *Little Dorrit*, on the other hand, the sudden sonic pause is decidedly productive. Instead of serving as a mechanism for ignoring and neglecting the rest of humanity, the silence-producing cotton here enables the reader, by way of Arthur, to gain key narrative information and to better understand the novel's underlying social networks.

Spaces of stillness, suspense, and sudden quiet prove crucial not only to the propulsion of plot but, concurrently and even more importantly, to the development and maintenance of healthy social relations. The social intimacies that hold this digressive novel together require acoustically insulated spaces in which to mature.

6 So We Meet Again: Silence and Serendipity on the Iron Bridge

"With the blue above, and the blue / Below, / And silence wheresoe'er I go"

- B. W. Procter ("The Sea," *English Songs*, 1832)

In an 1837 letter to John Forster, Dickens remarks, "I have always thought that the 'silence wheresoe'er I go' is a beautiful touch of Barry Cornwall's (otherwise Procter)…I know it's remarkable silent wherever *I* go, when I'm on the briny" (2 July 1837, emphasis original). While the unbroken and thereby unsettling silence of ocean voyages often had a depressive effect on Dickens, *Little Dorrit*'s Iron Bridge mobilizes the close connection between bodies of water and silence for more positive and productive means. The figure of the bridge moderates the vast silence of "the blue above and the blue below." As a suspended structure, it takes full advantage

of the abatement of noise provided by water, but its two endpoints on land provide visible, available routes back to the realm of lively bustle.

Built by John Rennie and opened in 1819 in an attempt to divert traffic from the highly congested London Bridge, the Iron Bridge was an architectural marvel. Also known as Southwark Bridge and Queen Street Bridge, it was the largest cast iron bridge ever built (Dickens *Bleak* 935nFN8)—hence its more colloquial name. Dickens knew the bridge well in his youth. It was the avenue by which he went from his work at Warren's Blacking Factory to his lodgings near the Marshalsea Prison and to his family behind its gate (White 190). It appears in *Our Mutual Friend*—another novel that touches closely on Dickens's childhood—but it plays its greatest role in *Little Dorrit*, alongside the Marshalsea Prison. The bridge first appears after Arthur invites his new acquaintance, Little Dorrit, to "go by the Iron Bridge…where there is an escape from the noise of the street" (109-10). After that, it becomes a crucial meeting place for the pair—a hushed and liminal space where trust, familiarity, and intimacy deepen in a way that proves impossible elsewhere.

Out on the Iron Bridge, Arthur and Little Dorrit stand in the midst of the living city without being overburdened by its output, sonic or otherwise. Physically suspended over the river, with only sky above and water below, they enter into a more metaphorical state of suspension; sound fades, time seems to slow, and life's usual pressures lessen as they utilize this threshold between public and private.[110] The bridge quickly becomes a favorite spot for Little

[110]Ben Moore follows Walter Benjamin in arguing that thresholds in the Dickensian city operate as "areas of intensity; places where transformation occurs" (336), and his comparison of a threshold to a hyphen, "the mark of punctuation that connects and divides…in the same gesture" (ibid), evokes both the function and form of a bridge.

Dorrit. As her father tells John Chivery, "Amy has gone for an airing on the Iron Bridge. She has become quite partial to the Iron Bridge of late, and seems to like to walk there better than anywhere" (233). She herself tells Chivery that she likes it "better than any place I know…[and] may be often here" (237). Her partiality for the Iron Bridge is interesting from a financial perspective. Unlike the nearby Blackfriars and London bridges, the Iron Bridge was a toll bridge[111] from its opening in 1819 until 1864—a feature that the editors of the Penguin edition cite as a possible cause of the bridge's "relative quietness" (935nFN8). Toll fees ensured that it never saw nearly the same level of traffic as its counterparts. In paying to use the Iron Bridge, Amy Dorrit and other characters give quiet space a monetary value—especially as the fee they pay is often for strolling, meeting, and speaking rather than actually crossing. Impoverished as she is, Little Dorrit *pays* to enjoy the bridge's acoustically insulating properties.[112]

The series of encounters between Little Dorrit and Arthur make the value of the space more apparent. The sociality that transpires makes it a place worth paying for. As Little Dorrit and Arthur head to the Iron Bridge for the first time, a brief exchange about Mr. Cripples and his rowdy schoolboys "bring[s] them more naturally together than Beau Nash might have done if they have lived in his golden days" (110). While the narrator dubs Cripples the unconscious "master of the ceremonies" in this naturalness between the pair, the environment they are about to enter deepens the growing bond between them. Once on the bridge, Dorrit broaches

---

Richard Lehan deepens these connections among threshold, bridge, and development in suggesting that "narrative flash points in Dickens's fiction occur where water and land meet" (44).

[111] In Chapter XVIII, "Little Dorrit's Lover," we see John Chivery pay the bridge's toll: "Little Dorrit's lover very soon laid down his penny on the toll-plate of the Iron Bridge, and came upon it looking about him for the well-known and well-beloved figure" (233).

[112] Young Dickens's use of the bridge while his family lived in the Marshalsea debtors' prison seems equally paradoxical.

an emotional topic that she generally avoids, urging Clennam not to judge or misunderstand her father. Defending her father and the Marshalsea at large while providing an intimate glimpse into her childhood, she "relieve[s] the faithful fullness of her heart, and modestly sa[ys], raising her eyes appealingly to her new friend's, 'I did not mean to say so much, nor have I ever but once spoken about this before'" (112). Arthur, placed by her appealing eyes into the category of friend, "feel[s] permitted" to ask her even more personal questions (ibid).

Before they withdraw from this first meeting on the Iron Bridge, a kind of telepathy has begun to take place between them. Hoping to resolve William Dorrit's financial fuddle, Clennam considers approaching Mr. Tite Barnacle, but "the *thought* did not present itself so quietly but that her quickness *intercepted* it. 'Ah!' said Little Dorrit, shaking her head…'Many people used to think once of getting my poor father out, but you don't know how hopeless it is'" (113). Only in a space of such soundlessness are Arthur's thoughts loud—i.e. interpretable, apparent—enough to be "intercepted" by his companion. Enveloped in stillness and trained on one another, they gain access to the contents of the other's mind. Dorrit, most timid of all creatures in *Little Dorrit*, "forg[ets] to be shy" on the bridge with Arthur and bares her emotions. Standing apart on the Iron Bridge, they come closer together and the rest of London recedes into a haze, "indistinctly mixed together" (114). Arthur's desire to "leave her with a reliance upon him…that she would cherish" and his insistence that she has a friend in him suggest that something is blooming in this world of haphazard relations. Indeed, the narrator deems this encounter the "beginning of the destined interweaving of their stories" (114).

Dorrit and Clennam's interaction on the bridge is demarcated by the narrator's attention to the London soundscape. As they leave the bridge for the Marshalsea, he notes, "there was

nothing, by the short way, that was pleasant to any of the five senses" (114), and London's ongoing hubbub brings Arthur back to the bridge, chapters later, for another encounter with Little Dorrit: "The crowd in the street jostling the crowd in his mind, and the two crowds making a confusion, he avoided London Bridge, and turned off in the quieter direction of the Iron Bridge. He had scarcely set foot upon it, when he saw Little Dorrit walking on before him…It was a timely chance" (278). The pursuit of silent space brings them serendipitously together—steering Arthur away from certain avenues and toward others—and the aural suspension of the Iron Bridge advances their relationship once again.

At this next meeting on the bridge, Little Dorrit turns before Arthur has a chance to speak, admitting that she "knew the step" (ibid). Sound waves are so well controlled on the Iron Bridge—the space so relatively silent—that Arthur's footfall becomes a unique identifier, a thing by which to know him. It is a distinct and distinguishing sound rather than one noise among many, lost in the muddle. Amy's familiarity with the sound of his step, though she "could hardly have expected [him]," bespeaks an interest in Arthur that she is embarrassed to betray—as her halting admission, "I thought it - sounded like yours," and the need to "recover…her confiding manner" make clear (ibid). An encroachment from the outer world, Maggy's bringing of letters, breaks up their intimacy—but not before the reader glimpses Amy Dorrit's love for Arthur Clennam in "a tremor on her lip, and a passing shadow of great agitation on her face" (ibid).

7 "Quiet Circumstances": Life & Love in a Superior Sort of Society

In the second book of *Little Dorrit*, the Dorrit family shakes free of its Marshalsea chains and joins London's upper classes. Traveling abroad for a season, they mingle with much of London's

fashionable society. Amid this new social milieu, however, "It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society in which they lived, greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea" (536). This assessment is no compliment to society—Amy goes on to explain the way in which its members "prowled about," "rarely knew their own minds, and seldom did what they said they would do, or went where they said they would go," "rather deteriorated one another," and "fell into a slouching way of life" (536)—but it seems to contain a compliment of sorts for the Marshalsea Prison, insofar that the society outside the Marshalsea gates is "superior," i.e. *worse*, in these various respects than the community within the prison. Superior could refer only to the greater scale of this society, but Amy's—and Dickens's—ongoing evaluation suggests that it falls short(er) in ways the fictional Marshalsea community does not.

Before Amy Dorrit leaves her prison home altogether at the end of Book I, she deems herself "unprotected and solitary" outside its gates (236). She worries, too, that her father "might not be so gently dealt with outside…[and] might not be so fit himself for the life outside" (113). Frederick Dorrit lives outside the prison, but "the bustling London thoroughfares [are] no very safe resort for him" (93). It might be argued that William Dorrit has been *made* unfit by his lengthy stay in the Marshalsea, and yet he proved unfit for life outside its walls before he ever entered them—an attribute he shares with Dickens's father.[113] Characterized at the time of his imprisonment as "very amiable and very helpless" (73), even the "sharpest practitioners g[i]ve

[113] According to White, "John Dickens, once his family was around him [in the Marshalsea], managed very well, as Charles's biographer [John Forster] recorded: 'They had no want of bodily comforts there. His father's income, still going on, was amply sufficient for that; and in every respect indeed but elbow room, I have heard him [Dickens] say, the family lived more comfortably in prison than they had done for a long time out of it.' Most of all they were free from duns, from the loud knocking at the street door, the abuse shouted up at them from the pavement for all the neighbors to hear" (*Mansions of Misery: A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison* 207).

him up as a hopeless job" (75), and the narrator concludes that he is *not* "a man with strength of purpose to face [his] troubles and fight them" (79). Unfit to handle his affairs before he is sent to debtors' prison, it is no surprise that he fares poorly once released. What *is* surprising is the manner in which his sociality thrives within the "iron gates" (93).

The alcoholic inmate and physician, Doctor Haggage, gives an early account of the prison that warrants a closer look. He tells new arrival William Dorrit,

> A little more elbow room is all we want here. We are quiet here; we don't get badgered here; there's no knocker here, sir, to be hammered at by creditors and bring a man's heart into his mouth. Nobody comes here to ask if a man's at home, and to say he'll stand on the door mat till he is. Nobody writes threatening letters about money, to this place. It's freedom, sir, it's freedom! I have had to-day's practice [child delivery] at home and abroad, on march, and aboard a ship, and I'll tell you this: I don't know that I have ever pursued it under such quiet circumstances, as here this day. Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about…Nothing of the kind here, sir. (78)

Though the physician's brandy guzzling and greasiness (78) signal the prison's invariably degrading influence, his emphasis on quietness and his association of "quiet circumstances" with both the sonic environment (no hammering, no knockers) and the pace of life (no hurrying about) speak to Dickens's interest in spaces that punctuate the roar. The noises that Haggage attributes to the outside world stem from indebtedness—creditors hammering at the door, threatening to stand on the mat indefinitely—but such noises are only the tip of the iceberg for the London soundscape, as Arthur's tirade about church bells makes clear.

Haggage's description of prison life as "freedom" must be seen for the insidious delusion that it is, but many of the novel's other scenes bear out his characterization of Marshalsea life as "quiet," sonically and circumstantially speaking. Such a prison would be rarely silent in the purest

sense of the term—though it *is* described this way at important points in the novel—but Dickens portrays it as a space that is well insulated from its noisy surroundings. His visually-driven depiction of the Marseilles prison in *Little Dorrit*'s opening chapter makes this more acoustic rendering of the Marshalsea unique. He defines the "villainous" Marseilles prison primarily by its relation to light (16)—its filtering of sunlight, rather than sound—and its tomblike atmosphere inspires no social warmth between inmates John Baptist and Monsieur Rigaud. In fact, their intermittent association in the narrative is a plague rather than an asset for Baptist.

There is something acoustically distinct, then, about the Marshalsea Prison. Location and structural design can explain some portion of its sound-buffering phenomenon. An 1843 plan of the Marshalsea Prison (then "for sale") shows that the prisoner dwelling houses were separated from the main thoroughfare, Borough High Street, by the gate, forecourt, keeper's house, *and* corridor, while a corridor surrounded the dwelling houses on all sides. The debtors' dwelling areas were insulated on the opposite side by the Admiralty Prison and chapel. Angel Alley ran along the prison's north side, and the south side abutted a large swath of open ground. Investigators into the state of the prison in 1818 recommended that this open land, "a void space of ground of about two hundred and seventy-eight feet by forty-five feet" (11 *Report*), be turned into an exercise yard, but it never came to fruition. Dickens would undoubtedly have seen this ground as an acoustic asset. While discussing a garden that he rented at Tavistock House, he explained, "the principal object I had in hiring it, was to keep out possible noises" (23 August 1860 to J.P. Davis).

Despite these conjectures, much of the acoustic insulation of the Marshalsea Prison likely belongs to the fictional world of *Little Dorrit* rather than the London reality. The insulation is as

much metaphorical as it is material. The prison's acoustic defenses, from its "high walls" (84) to its "strong door" (95), enable Dickens to continue exploring the social productivity of silence.[114] They make it a protected place for sociality to flourish. John Chivery finds "an appropriate grace in the lock" as he imagines a future with Amy Dorrit: "With the world shut out (except the part of it that would be shut in); with its troubles and disturbances only known to them by hearsay…they would glide down the stream of time, in pastoral domestic happiness" (229). Unfortunately, these same protective features can make it an arena for delusion and avoidance. Like Esther with her silent waystations in *Bleak House*, characters such as Arthur Clennam must use the prison as a temporary space for contemplation and social development rather than a dwelling place.

William Dorrit, on the other hand, presents a complicated case. Dickens's narrator censures his behavior within *and* outside the prison, mocking his position as Father of the Marshalsea before painting a dark portrait of his disintegration outside its walls. Nevertheless, a comparison of William Dorrit's sociality in the prison with his social relations outside of it speaks quite plainly—as does his hallucinatory return to the Marshalsea Prison on his deathbed. Dorrit's position as the Father of the Marshalsea, however flawed and delusional at base, leaves him deeply intertwined in a social network. He stands at the center of a close-knit community and enjoys the companionship of brother, daughter, and turnkey, among others. The personal failings he exhibits in the prison only intensify in the outside world—along with a tic in his speech that renders him almost unintelligible—and he finds himself increasingly isolated: estranged

[114] William Dorrit's room is also described as "curtained" and "carpeted" (99), adding further sound insulation.

from old companions, at odds with Amy, and obsessed with social connections that prove little more than financial liabilities.

William Dorrit inherited his position as Father of the Marshalsea from his old Marshalsea friend, Bob the turnkey. "When I'm off the lock for good," Bob tells him, "you'll be the Father of the Marshalsea" (80). The prison community carries this tradition from generation to generation after Bob's death, sustaining Dorrit's reputation just as they collectively nurse his youngest daughter (83). Amy, who purportedly carries the "tone" of the Marshalsea in her, is "tranquil, domestic, home-loving" (264) and "quiet" (111). One thing that a sound-sensitive reading draws out from the opening scene of Book II—after Dorrit abandons the Marshalsea to its orphanhood and nearly leaves Amy behind—is the clarity of *sound* in the outside world. As the family climbs in the Alps, "their voices and all other sounds [are] surprisingly clear" and "noise and hurry [are] rife" (457).[115] In this realm of clearer sounds and muddier social relations, William Dorrit sees his friendships and intimacies—the very foundations of his life—crumble.

As soon as he leaves the Marshalsea, Dorrit embarks on a rigorous course of cutting former ties. Arthur Clennam, the impetus for their newfound freedom, is first to go. William tells Amy that it would be "highly indelicate in Mr Clennam to - ha - to seek to renew communication with me or with any member of my family, under existing circumstances…I cannot for a moment - ha - hold any correspondence with so - hum - coarse a mind" (480). Stuttering before or in the middle of each declaration, he scarcely seems to agree with himself. He concludes with as much

[115] The attention to noise and hurry in this description recalls Doctor Haggage's characterization of the outside world (as opposed to the Marshalsea), where "people are restless, worried, hurried about" (78).

force as he can muster: “Mr Clennam is put altogether out of the question, and…we have nothing to do with him or he with us” (480).

The next old friend to come under fire is turnkey-in-training John Chivery, who waits on Dorrit at his hotel during a brief return to London. Dorrit feigns unfamiliarity with this former acquaintance—“It is Young John, I think; is it not?”—but rebuffs the young man as soon as they are alone together. His indignation at being sought out leaves “amazement and horror depicted in the unfortunate John’s face - for he had rather expected to be embraced next” (660). John’s “powerfully expressive” horror at being repulsed rather than embraced and his insistence that he “never thought of lessening the distance betwixt [them]” leave Dorrit ashamed (660), but no attempt to reinstate their former relations succeeds: “nothing while John was there could change John’s face to its natural color and expression, or restore John’s natural manner” (663). Dorrit’s social relations have lost any naturalness they might have had as the distance between him and his those in his former network grows.

While William Dorrit extricates himself from the only social network he ever thrived in, Amy and Frederick work to recreate the Marshalsea environment and its relations. Unlike William, Frederick is “silent and retiring…[with] no use for speech” (481). He lives in the top story of their Italian palace, which is so acoustically insulated that “he might have practiced pistol-shooting without much chance of discovery by the other inmates” (504). In these upper rooms and in the quiet Venetian picture-galleries, Frederick and Amy develop a relationship that reflects (and effectively replaces, for a time) the lost bond between Amy and her father. Frederick and Amy enjoy one another without speech: the “greatest delight of which the old man had shown himself…arose out of these excursions [to the picture-galleries], when he would

carry a chair about for [Amy] from picture to picture, and stand behind it, in spite of all her remonstrances, silently presenting her to the noble Venetians" (505). "Silently presenting" Amy to these works of art, Frederick expresses himself—namely, his love and regard for his niece—in a manner as different as possible from his brother's humming and hawing.

In a scene that closely precedes William's hallucinatory return to the Marshalsea, the former Father comes across Amy and Frederick in their recreated prison environment:

> …he saw a light in a small anteroom. It was a curtained nook, like a tent, within two other rooms…There was a draped doorway, but no door; and as he stopped here, looking in unseen, he felt a pang. Surely not like jealousy? For why like jealousy? There were only his daughter and his brother there…Allowing for the great difference in the still-life of the picture, the figures were much the same as of old…So had he sat many a night, over a coal fire far away; so had she sat, devoted to him. (667)

The smallness of the space—a "nook" in an anteroom[116]—recalls the cramped Marshalsea, and its location in an upper story makes it a fitting double for Amy's "sky parlor" (102). Meanwhile, curtains and drapings enhance the scene's sense of intimacy and quietude. Uncle and niece inhabit a liminal space in this "curtained nook" that lies "within two other rooms" and has a "draped doorway, but no door" (ibid). In what, for Amy at least, must be a conscious recreation of the nights when father and daughter sat together in this manner, the two figures belong somewhere between the past and current moments. With William Dorrit looking on unseen, they inhabit both Italy and London, mansion and prison; they are themselves and yet, in Dorrit's eyes, they are also the "figures…of old" that he recognizes with a "pang" of longing (ibid).

[116] Anterooms sometimes served a sound-buffering function in nineteenth-century homes. They were used as staging spaces to prevent servants' preparatory hubbub from disturbing rooms such as the dining and drawing rooms.

The disintegration of William Dorrit's social ties coincides—not so coincidentally—with his construction of very well fortified castles in the air. He builds on, "busily, busily" (665), until, in the middle of a society dinner, he finds himself back inside the high-walled Marshalsea Prison. Surrounded by choice society, he calls for Bob, his old friend and predecessor as Father of the Marshalsea: "Send for Bob. Hum. Send for Bob - best of all the turnkeys - send for Bob!" (676). With his return to the Marshalsea, welcoming his fellow dinner guests to the prison and publicly resuming his title of Father, Dorrit reclaims the relationships in his life that mattered most. As "the broad stairs of his Roman palace…contracted in his failing sight to the narrow stairs of his London prison" (679), the gap separating him from daughter, brother, and old friends finally closes: "he would suffer no one but [Amy] to touch him, his brother excepted" (ibid).

Still as flawed in his manner of loving Amy as he has always been, the dying Dorrit nevertheless "loved her in his old way" (680). Amy no longer feels that "[she has] come to be at a distance from him; and that even in the midst of all the servants and attendants, he is deserted, and in want of [her]" (494). Far from deserted now, Dorrit slips quietly to rest (680). The narrator's emphasis on the quietness of his death—"Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great Castle melted…Quietly, quietly, the ruled and cross-ruled countenance…became fair and blank. Quietly, quietly, the reflected marks of the prison bars…faded away" (681)—echoes the penultimate chapter of Book I, when Arthur "pass[es] from the prison, carrying the quiet with him into the turbulent streets" (444).[117] Dorrit, like the others, *must* leave the prison

[117] At the end of Book I, Chapter XXXV, Arthur tells Amy Dorrit that her and her father will be leaving the Marshalsea. When he leaves, the narrator tells us, "Clennam rose softly, opened and closed the door without a sound, and passed from the prison, carrying the quiet with him into the turbulent streets" (444).

behind. He cannot continue to dwell, literally or psychologically, in the "place where [his spirit] had broken its wings" in staying so long (679). But unlike Amy and Arthur, William fails to build a life outside the Marshalsea. The remnants of his imprisonment, the "reflected marks of the prison bars," will fade away only with his death (680-81).

8 Taking the Quiet with Them

The most compelling evidence for the Marshalsea Prison as a space of unlooked-for social development—a place with significance that stretches beyond its generally degrading effects and its "haunting" of Dickens's life[118]—is the role it plays in Little Dorrit and Arthur's reunion and marriage. Arthur's entanglement in debt and his decision to go to the Marshalsea rather than the more spacious King's Bench (750) set the happy conclusion of his and Little Dorrit's relationship in motion. He soon finds himself in William Dorrit's old room, with all its "crowding associations with the one good and gentle creature who had sanctified it" (751-2). The Marshalsea is "unwontedly quiet" on his arrival, leading him down avenues of contemplation that set the remainder of the plot in motion: "In the unnatural peace of having gone through the dreaded arrest, and got there…he could think of some passages in his life, almost as if he were removed from them into another state of existence…it was not remarkable that everything his memory turned upon should bring him round again to Little Dorrit" (752).

[118] White gives a heavily biographical reading of the prison. Noting that "the prison haunted [Dickens]…indelibly associated with his deepest humiliation – the fact of not just his father's imprisonment but the poverty that accompanied it, worst of all the demeaning drudgery in the blacking factory" (277), he applies this to the novel: "Dorrit would be haunted by its memory until…he died; and the shame of the prison and the beggary it induced would haunt his older children too. Even Amy Dorrit cannot quite escape the prison's baneful influence" (289).

Arthur's status in the Marshalsea Prison resembles "another state of existence"—the regular progression of his life hangs suspended, and he is free to wander through its many passages. In the state of suspension produced by his silent prison room, Arthur senses "the gentle presence that was equally inseparable from the walls and bars about him" (752). In this room, he "commune[s] with only one silent figure within the ever-frowning walls" (773). And here, with the help of John Chivery, he comes to recognize his love for Little Dorrit, her own love for him, and to see "how much the dear little creature had influenced his better resolutions" (752). As the narrator tellingly remarks, "None of us clearly know to whom or to what we are indebted in this wise, until some *marked stop* in the whirling wheel of life brings the right perception with it" (ibid). According to the narrator, then, it requires a marked *stop* for characters to see themselves and their relationships for what they are.

The term, "marked stop," is associated in Dickens's metaphor with transportation and industry, implicating the whirling wheels of carriage and factory that keep urban life churning. The notion of a stop is also associated with music—from rests in a musical line to the stopping of air and sound in pipe organs. Each case implies the cessation of sound *and* motion, and the absence of both in Arthur's prison room bears this implication out. The idea that a marked stop—a more global cessation in the surrounding environment—provides the "right perception" reflects Dickens's concern that increasingly chaotic surroundings interfered with self-knowledge and social relations. It recalls, as well, Ether's expanding and increasingly clear perception after each foray into silence in *Bleak House*. Arthur must perceive beyond the London roar and the rattle of his own factory in order to recognize Amy Dorrit's impact on his life and realize the future he wants with her.

Little Dorrit, meanwhile, longs for the very place that is "so eloquent" to Clennam and "sp[eaks] to him so mournfully of her, and of his loss of her" (756). In a letter written months earlier, she tells him, "so dearly do I love the scene of my poverty and your kindness. O so dearly, O so dearly!" (580). That setting now becomes the scene of *his* poverty and *her* kindness. On her arrival at the former Dorrit room, "a quiet reigning in the room…seemed to diffuse itself through the else noisy prison" (ibid). In this space, a complement to the Iron Bridge, Dorrit and Clennam confess the love and regard that they have been withholding (793) and decide "Never to part…never any more until the last" (850). When Arthur's release date arrives, however, he declines to leave the prison. Determined to leave the Marshalsea only for the church where he and Amy will be locked together for life, he resides there a day longer than his sentence. Meanwhile, his room forecasts the tenor of their impending union: "Where in the world was there a room so full of quiet joy!" (857).

Arthur and Amy's wedding forms a final link in *Little Dorrit*'s chain of formative "quiet" moments. Quietness pervades their wedding day as it pervaded William Dorrit's death, marking the end of Book II just as it marked the end of Book I. The couple passes "very quietly" out of the prison (857) and, after pausing for a moment on the church steps after their ceremony, "went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along…the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the forward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar" (860).

The techniques and technologies that produce silent space in the Dickensian city prove as important to this "fictional topography" and its inhabitants as the widely studied technologies

responsible for modern communication and transportation (Wolfreys xvi). Dickens's use of acoustically insulated space in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* reflects his literary investment in striking a balance between sound and silence and his recognition of silence's social potential. Silent space grows increasingly permanent and more physically prominent from one novel to the next, foregrounding its integral role in human sociality. Ironically, however, the final word of *Little Dorrit*'s "very quiet conclusion" [119] is "uproar"—a nod to the reality of the London soundscape. There is no negating the noise and bustle, which are as essential to the urban environment—and the urban experience—as its spaces of silence.

This chapter has examined how the production of silence promotes character development and connectedness within two of Dickens's later narratives, but it is worth restating that silence in the authorial environment was equally important. Behind the extra layers of wood and baize that insulated his study, Dickens could *hear* his characters speak. He spoke of this supraliterary communication with such surety that George Henry Lewes compared the phenomenon to hallucination: "In no other perfectly sane mind," Lewes remarks, "have I observed vividness of imagination approaching so closely to hallucination" (Lewes 144).

Writing *Villette* at roughly the same time that Dickens wrote *Bleak House*, Charlotte Brontë relied on a creative process similarly imbued with silence. She characterizes the space of creativity as "the divine, silent, unseen land of thought" and describes her novels as fabrications fashioned "in the silent workshop of [the author's] own brain" (17 September 1849). While *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* portray silence and silent space as key ingredients in human sociality,

[119] Dickens closes his final Number Plan with one comment: "Very quiet conclusion" (905).

silence assumes a more definite role in communication and network formation in *Villette*. Brontë's characters, too, utilize pockets of silence for personal development and social engagement—this time in the private, domestic sphere rather than the Victorian city—but narrator and main character Lucy Snowe also wields silence as power, as a tool for female agency and a means of negotiating the terms of intimate relationships.

Chapter Two
The Cultivation of Silent Space in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Raised among the Yorkshire moors that Elizabeth Gaskell would later call "the very realms of silence,"[120] Charlotte Brontë brings a distinct perspective to this study of Victorian silence. In contrast to the carefully engineered writing environments of London contemporaries such as Carlyle and Dickens, the silence in which Brontë worked was a natural facet of her surroundings, but it was no less valued. For Brontë, too, silence was a crucial ingredient in the creative process. She figures her third novel, *Shirley*, as a fabrication fashioned in "the silent workshop of [her] own brain"[121]—a metaphor that recalls the silent spaces in which she did much of her work—and her most writerly character, Lucy Snowe, requires "the fresh silence of morning, or the recluse peace of evening, to win from the Creative Impulse one evidence of his presence, one proof of his force" (*Villette* 395).

As with Dickens's *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, much of Brontë's final novel, *Villette* (1853), takes place in an urban environment, making the narrative's many sonically-insulated locations both striking and noteworthy.[122] Kate Brown highlights one of the most interesting qualities of this novel, however, in her observation, "We do not think of…*Villette* as an urban novel, despite the provocation of its title…As a title, it bluntly insists that what matters about the novel is its urban setting. Yet critics have tended to ignore this insistence" (350). Brown credits Brontë's blurring of the urban and the provincial—one critical aspect of which, as this chapter

---

[120] Gaskell letter to Unknown, End of Sept 1853. (Letter 167, pp. 247)

[121] Letter to W. S. Williams, 17 September 1849

[122] While nineteenth-century Brussels was admittedly less urbanized than London and Paris, Belgium became continental Europe's first "modern industrial nation" in the mid-nineteenth century, "bidding fair rival to England" in the manufacturing of goods (Bonfiglio 602).

insists, is the hybridity of its soundscape. Sonically, the town of Villette becomes an imaginative cross between the silent moors of Brontë's upbringing and the rapidly urbanizing London that she witnessed in the early 1850s. It is, ultimately, a welding together of urban and rural.[123]

In a strictly historical sense, much of *Villette*'s soundscape seems implausible, as Brontë's and Lucy Snowe's shared impulse to recreate the quiet spaces of their youths wins out over a more faithful rendering of nineteenth-century Brussels. Snowe comments, for example, on the Pensionnat alley's surprising protection from urban noise: As she "listen[s] to what seemed the far-off sounds of the city," she admits, "Far-off, in truth, they were not: this school was in the city's center…Quite near were wide streets brightly lit, teeming at this moment with life" (120). This alley ("l'allée défendue") is one of several locations where she benefits from an attenuated soundscape—gaining clarity about her future aims on its bench and developing a bond with fellow teacher Paul Emanuel along its walks.

Examining silence in the context of this unusual urban novel expands our understanding of what constitutes an urban novel and where exactly the division between urban and provincial lies in Victorian literature. The traditional juxtaposition between city bustle and provincial peace breaks down in *Villette*. Meanwhile, the critical tendency to view this novel as something other than urban suggests that what we hear in its diegetic soundscape exerts greater influence than its ostensible location. Snowe posits silence as a vehicle for intimacy,[124] communication, and

---

[123] Scholars such as Heather Glen, Jonathon Shears, and Eva Badowska highlight the significance of Brontë's five visits to the 1851 Great Exhibition in London—and commodity culture more broadly—for her writing of *Villette.* Glen asserts that in both the Great Exhibition catalog and Lucy's narrative "there is a new kind of emphasis on things… objects" (215), while Badowska similarly argues that *Villette* was published in the midst of "a world newly captivated by the peculiar resonance of things" (1510).

[124] In its most positive form, silence in *Villette* is "wordless presence" (385)—an ideal form of togetherness for Lucy.

even power throughout her autobiography, and it is the availability of silent space—even in the midst of the town of Villette—that proves most vital to her attainment of these things over the course of the narrative. While Brontë fractures the metonymic identification of urban space with noise, noise nevertheless represents a more overt threat in her work—an interruption to relationships and togetherness, as well as to self-coherence and even sanity.

Villette takes the production and utilization of silent space to a level of prevalence never seen in Dickens's work and rarely seen after her death. Published in January of 1853, it exhibits a striking awareness of the social utility of silent space and the role human agency must play in its survival in a modernizing world. Brontë's use of silent space for character development resembles Dickens's use of it for similar ends,[125] but the interplay between character and soundscape goes a step further in Brontë's work. Her final novel features characters who not only seek silent space, but employ various means to enhance and maintain such spaces. Lucy, for one, is the self-appointed "gardener" of l'allée défendue (119). Granting her characters this active role in fashioning the fictional soundscape, Brontë takes a shrewd look at the objects, techniques, and human habits that safeguarded silence in the period.[126] In *Villette*, author and character collaborate to produce silence through means as diverse as landscaping, snowfall, silent slippers, and well-oiled door hinges, creating sonic oases in an "urban" soundscape that pushes the bounds of Victorian realism.

---

[125] The overlapping publication dates of *Bleak House* (March 1852-September 1853) and *Villette* (January 1853) makes their comparable use of silent spaces compelling, despite Brontë's strong dislike of Esther Summerson and Dickens's claim that he never read Brontë's works.

[126] Numerous sound-reducing methods make their appearance in this novel, much as they made their appearance at midcentury. One of the curiosities featured at the 1851 Great Exhibition was a "silent alarm clock that turned one's bed on its side"—an item of which Brontë took note during one of her visits (Glen 214 - see *CBL* ii. 655 and 656 n.).

Silence has gained considerable attention as a *meta*critical term describing Lucy Snowe's gaps and omissions in narration,[127] but Brontë scholarship falls short in its consideration of the novel's diegetic silence. The tendency to treat silence in *Villette* as shorthand for withheld information, virtually indistinguishable from censorship or omission, reduces it to its more negative connotations—absence, negation, and suppression—such that it is rarely considered outside these bounds. This chapter breaks with much of the work that has been done on this front by approaching silence as material rather than metaphorical, privileging phenomenal silence as it appears in the world of the story. Rather than conceiving of silence as *that not said*, this chapter treats it as a positive environmental condition and unpacks the constellation of strategies that sustains its presence in Lucy's narrative. Focusing on the silence produced by locations, physical objects, and human actions in *Villette* disentangles it from the above associations of reticence and censorship and illuminates the role of silent space in Lucy's emergence as a socially embedded figure.[128]

Current studies of the novel tend to fall on one side or the other of a larger critical divide: a study of the bodies that populate and walk about Villette, or a look at the novel's formal

---

[127] In "A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession" (2011), Gretchen Braun points to a longstanding critical dichotomy that casts Lucy's "silences, repetitions, and obfuscations" as either signs of oppression or strategies for empowerment (190). See, for example, Eve Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000); Ivan Kreilkamp's *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005); Jolene Zigarovich's *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives* (2012); and Leila Silvana May's *Secrecy and Disclosure in Victorian Fiction* (2016).

[128] Kristen Pond's "The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" (2017) is one of few existing sources to argue for the positive function of silence in Brontë's novel. Pond points to the "multiple significations" of Lucy's silences and argues for the "complexity and versality" of silence before making a case for the "ethical potential of silence in the context of [Lucy Snowe's] relationships" (1). Importantly, Pond characterizes silence as a "potentially positive counter to speech" and a "space of ethical rhetorical action" rather than "the absence of voice" (1). Pond's refinement of the critical approach to silence, however, remains largely in the realm of metaphor and she gives little attention to silence as it appears in the physical environment or as a material experience for characters.

armature—i.e., Brontë's narrative style. The dominant push in recent scholarship has been to read Brontë's *Villette* with attention to the corporeality of the female bodies she depicts.[129] Breaking with a critical tradition that emphasizes visual control and surveillance in *Villette*, these examinations of embodiment privilege a cluster of less critically recognized senses—touch, most prominently—and leave hearing, that other "primary" sense, largely out of the conversation. Building on the work of scholars such as Charlotte Mathieson and Estelle Murail who deprioritize the visual in *Villette*, my argument foregrounds aural experience—revealing, among other things, that the struggle for control unfolds as much in the sonic realm as it does in the visual. This chapter also attempts to bridge the divide in recent scholarship by attending to Lucy's narrative tendencies in conjunction with the phenomenon of embodiment. Her descriptions of the sonic environment and aural experience reveal the soundscape's impact on Brontë's strikingly embodied characters.

Gretchen Braun, Caroline Franklin, and Beth Torgerson, among others, note a trajectory toward greater social connectedness in Lucy's narrative,[130] but her reliance on sonically insulated space throughout this process remains unexamined. According to Braun, Lucy "intuits" the vital role that social bonds play in developing both agency and a coherent sense of self, and her

---

[129] See, for example: Judith E. Pike's "Disability in Charlotte Brontë's Early Novellas, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*: The Legacy of Finic's Disabled and Racialized Body" (2018); Karin Koehler's "Immaterial Correspondence: Letters, Bodies and Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" (2018); Estelle Murail's "A Body Passes By: the Flâneur and the Senses in Nineteenth-Century London and Paris" (2017), and Charlotte Mathieson's "'A Still Ecstasy of Freedom and Enjoyment': Walking the City in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" (2017).

[130] Torgersen argues that, "In simplistic terms, Lucy's growth moves from repression and self-control to a fuller, richer existence of emotional connection with others" (62). Franklin calls *Villette* a novel of education that concludes with "the socialization of the protagonist, whose vocation will be to socialize other females in her turn" (147). Meanwhile, Pennington argues that Lucy's relationship with Paul, in particular, "allows Lucy-as-narrator to stage development into an improved personal and social state" (149), but believes that Lucy may still be isolated at the narrative's end (141).

"attempts to form a relationship of affective reciprocity, correlated with efforts to forge a social identity and active participation in society" form the main thrust of *Villette*'s plot (198-99). I echo Braun, Torgerson, and Franklin in regarding Lucy's socialization as the predominant evolution occurring in *Villette*, and I argue that the soundscape plays a primary role in this process. I therefore approach Lucy Snowe's narrative with attention to the soundscapes and aural experiences that she depicts in order to unpack the import of silent space for her social development—namely, for her growing ability to sustain intimate ties, first with Graham Bretton and later with Paul Emanuel, and for her ultimate personal fulfilment as a school directress.

As important as silent space proved for Brontë's creative process, the years after Branwell, Emily, and Anne Brontë's deaths revealed another cornerstone of that process: social communion. In deference to a father who abhorred ambient domestic noise,[131] the Brontë siblings exercised their own form of silent sociality—writing communally, copiously, and *quietly*. In the scattered months and years that Charlotte spent at home before her siblings' deaths, she enjoyed a combination of silence and society quite fertile for her writing. Finishing *Shirley* and composing *Villette* while "quite alone," by contrast, required a fortitude formerly untapped.[132] In these later years, however, Brontë also came to perceive the silence of her surroundings as a signal of her siblings' presence as much as their absence. On May 22nd, 1850, she told W. S. Williams, "In the

[131] Several biographical sources note this about Patrick Brontë. In a September 1853 letter to John Forster, Elizabeth Gaskell notes that Mr. Brontë "did not like children" and that "noise &c. made him shut himself up and want no companionship—nay be positively annoyed by it" (qtd. in McNees 68).

[132] In a letter to Ellen Nussey written on 16 February 1850, Charlotte calls herself "quite alone." She tells publisher George Smith that she has "no one to whom to read a line—or of whom to ask a counsel," and concludes: "'Jane Eyre' was not written under such circumstances, nor were two-thirds of 'Shirley'" (letter to GS, 30 October 1852).

hill-country silence [Emily's and Anne's] poetry comes by lines and stanzas into 'my' mind." Brontë distilled this experience into Snowe's relationship with the ultimately absent Paul Emanuel, but, more than this, it inflects her very conception of silence in the novel.

One of the theoretical stakes of this chapter is the recognition of Brontean silence as crucially distinct from pure absence and even solitude. Brontë told Ellen Nussey in 1850, "Now and then the silence of the house—the solitude of the room has pressed on me with a weight I found it difficult to bear" (16 Feb 1850). The construction of this sentence formalizes a break between silence and solitude on which this chapter hinges: while silence may coincide with social estrangement (consider, for example, Lucy Snowe's experience during the long vacation), for Brontë it is never the silence of the space itself that is troubling, but rather the absence or loss of human connection—the utter aloneness. In the sentence noted above, a dash separates the "silence of the house" from the weight that Brontë finds so difficult to bear. While silence is visually (and, I argue, conceptually) divided from the pressing weight she struggles under, the "solitude of the room" appears immediately before it and is directly responsible for it. The "solitude" that modifies Brontë's opening mention of silence constitutes a self-correction: an attempt to make her statement more clearly reflect her sentiments.[133]

Brontë's distinction sheds further light on an important ambivalence in Victorian conceptions of silence—one noted at some length in the previous chapter. Socially inflected silence proves an invaluable and a powerful force in Victorian fiction, while the silence that

[133] Brontë's former productivity suggests it's not the absence of sound but the absence of company that dismays her and halts her work. Her subsequent assertion, "It is so bad for the mind to be quite alone," lends further support. This metaphor of solitude as an unbearable, suffocating weight passes directly into *Villette*, e.g. in the long vacation.

accompanies social isolation or disconnection can wreak havoc on the human mind and the writerly impulse. What Brontë's work illuminates all the more clearly, however, is that there aren't simply two kinds of silence. Instead, silence is expansive and complex in what it signifies. As Brontë's letters and her final novel elucidate, silence is not so much the absence of signs as it is a visceral embodiment of that foundational Derridean paradox: For Brontë, and for Lucy, it is presence and absence yoked together. The "hill-country silence" around Haworth and "reigning silence" of Lucy's home in the Fauborg Clothilde constitute the trace of voices that are "not uttered" (*Villette* 546), yet are perpetually re-experienced.[134]

1 Quiet Beginnings, Unpropitious Atmospheres, and "L'allée défendue"

Lucy shows a marked preference for attenuated soundscapes from the beginning of her narrative. The Bretton home of her childhood "specially suited [her]," with its "large peaceful rooms" and "fine antique street, where Sundays and holidays seemed always to abide — so quiet was its atmosphere" (7). She elaborates on this preference for the Bretton home and its perpetual Sunday-like atmosphere, explaining that she "liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came [she] almost felt it a disturbance, and wished rather it had still held aloof" (8). It is in this insulated location that Lucy-as-narrator provides a glimpse of herself and her life before the dissolution of her originary social bonds. In quiet Bretton, housed with

[134] Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. See also: Zigarovich, Jolene. *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012 and Levenson, Karen Chase. "'Happiness is not a potato': The Victorian Cultivation of Happiness." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2011), pp. 161-169.

her godmother, she was "a good deal taken notice of" (7), while outside Bretton she yet retains "kinsfolk" and a "permanent residence" (8).

There are few references to sonically-insulated space in the tumultuous period between this opening at Bretton and Lucy's installment at Beck's pensionnat in Villette. The intervening period is one of social dislocation and alienation, and though Lucy's life may be uneventful for stretches at a time, her depiction of the soundscape foregrounds stormy weather, wailing winds, and nerve-wracking noise rather than a reigning Sunday quiet.[135] The period of her residence with Miss Marchmont, for example, lacks stimulus and change, but she does not characterize it as a *sonically* quiet period. And while she finds comfort in her relationship with Marchmont, her experience is not one of true social embeddedness. Instead, the climactic event of this episode in Lucy's life is an ear-piercing storm that portends loss: "the wind was wailing at the windows: it had wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it took a new tone — an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear; a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust" (42). This "accent" nearly drives her to distraction, and she attempts to safeguard her mind by plugging her ears—"'Oh, hush! hush!' I said in my disturbed mind, making a vain effort to stop my ears against that subtle, searching cry" (42-3).

The "restless, hopeless cry" that pierces her ears on the eve of Miss Marchmont's death becomes a signifier for her moments of greatest loss. She recalls, "I had heard that very voice ere this. Three times in the course of my life, events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm…denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life" (43). Her suspicion, as a

[135] When Lucy reaches London, too, the soundscape is marked by "strange speech" and "tolling bells" (51, 52).

child, that the voice of this eastern wind heralds disease—"epidemic diseases, I believed, were often heralded by a gasping, sobbing, tormented, long-lamenting east wind…I listened, and trembled" (ibid)—is a subtle clue about the fates of her missing kinsfolk. Whatever the cause of Lucy's orphaned state, these strange, "almost articulate" accents come to represent the doom of her family, her elderly companion, and eventually her fiancé (42). Miss Marchmont dies that very night, without the opportunity to make provision for Lucy in her will.

The episode with Marchmont reveals a more widespread correspondence in the novel between environmental noise and the straining of social bonds. Time and again, noise assaults and divides. Consider, for example, Lucy's efforts to tame the uproar in her classroom as a new and unwelcome teacher—on which occasion she notes "a row of eyes and brows that threatened stormy weather" (87).[136] The noise of the storm, much like the clamor of her rebellious students, is not a passive presence. It does not reside in the background as a vague or diffuse condition, but instead exerts a very active force on the listener. Piercing, trilling, and unavoidable, it cannot be tuned out. Lucy's connection between "accents in the storm" and a "state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life" (43) in this episode is even more telling. While she is ostensibly referring to the epidemics "heralded" by these late-winter weather conditions, the rest of her narrative builds a connection between invasive noise and a degraded quality of life.

While storms have traditionally been read as symbolic breaks in narrative, representative of traumatic experience and psychic disruption—and while compelling arguments of this nature

[136] Lucy describes the way in which her students "opened the campaign by a series of titterings and whisperings…[which] soon swelled into murmurs and short laughs, which the remoter benches caught up and echoed more loudly" (88). "This growing revolt," she notes, "soon became oppressive enough" (ibid).

have been made specifically about the storms in *Villette*[137]—it is the physical experience of this storm *as it is projected to rage*, rather than its potential function as a breakpoint, that is pertinent to my argument. The storm's distinct tones assault the ear and portend social dislocation, and it is this variation of the storm-as-symbol thematic—rather than its representation of unprocessed psychic material—that defines this chapter's reading of tumultuous atmospheric conditions.

Though Lucy is still prey to "certain accidents of the weather" at Beck's school (121), she finds a new space of sonic peace there in "l'allée défendue"—or "the forbidden path"—that borders the pensionnat garden (119). The forbidden nature of this alley would seem to make it a space of solitude, and Lucy does spend ample time alone there, but it also becomes the site of many of her most meaningful exchanges with Paul Emanuel. The sonic significance of this space becomes clear as Lucy sits on a bench along the path and "listen[s] to what seemed the far-off sounds of the city" (120). "Far-off, in truth, they were not," she adds, "this school was in the city's center…Quite near were wide streets…teeming at this moment with life: carriages were rolling through them" (ibid).[138]

The sonic insulation that Lucy attributes to this alley is made possible by the architecture and landscaping that surround it. The garden that lies along one side is considered large for its location in the city center—a remnant, possibly, of the pensionnat's use as a convent before the

[137]See, for example: Braun, Gretchen. "'A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession': Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *ELH*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 189-212.

[138] The softening influence of this alley's sonic insulation is all the more impressive in light of the "tremendous rattle" that carriage wheels tended to make on the "flinty Villette pavement" (356).

city "overspread this quarter" (117). Lucy highlights the value of this "planted spot of ground" in a location where "all is stone around," and calls the garden's massive fruit trees "convent-relics": lingering evidence of the "deep and leafy seclusion" that once "embosom[ed] the building" (ibid). This green space exerts a softening influence in many respects—breaking up the blankness of stone walls and tempering the heat of the city's pavement—and its landscaping holds the key to the alley's attractive quietude.[139]

Vegetation blankets the hard surfaces on either side of the alley's "narrow" walk, intercepting echoes that might otherwise occur: "Mossy earth" and clustering nasturtiums cling to the tree trunks that line one side, while vines cover the "very high wall" that blocks city noise on the other (117-19). Dense shrubbery, "grown very thick and close on each side," absorbs any sound that might make its way through gaps in the tree line and even "weav[es] overhead a roof of branch and leaf" (119). The enclosed nature of the alley makes its sonic insulation easier to imagine, transforming it into an almost indoor space—and indeed, Lucy treats it as such, utilizing it as she would a parlor or study. Unwelcome human noise, which presents the only real sonic threat to this space, is kept largely out by the "windowless backs" of the surrounding premises (with the exception of Paul's window) and by the path's forbidden status, which keeps students away. Lucy complains, however, that "in the broad, vulgar middle of the day, when…[students] were spread abroad, vying with the denizens of the boys' college close at hand, in the brazen exercise of their lungs and limbs…the garden was a trite, trodden-down place enough" (118).

[139] While I make the claim below that the alley could have been protected from urban noise, it remains unlikely that a city alley would be so quiet, suggesting such quietude serves a deeper psychological need for Lucy and for Brontë.

Lucy's appreciation for the alley is evident not only in the amount of time that she spends there, but also in her careful cultivation of the space. Soon after she becomes a "frequenter" of this long-neglected path, she begins to assume the responsibilities of a caretaker—tending to the environment to which she is drawn:

> I made myself gardener of some tintless flowers that grew between [the alley's] closely-ranked shrubs; I cleared away the relics of past autumns, choking up a rustic seat at the far end. Borrowing of Goton, the cuisiniére, a pail of water and a scrubbing-brush, I made this seat clean. (119)

Lucy rejuvenates this "shunned" location, giving a certain hominess to the area beneath its green "roof" (ibid). In reclaiming the "rustic seat" along the path, she makes it a place to spend time—a bower for resting as well as a walkway for strolling. She must share this space with characters such as Paul and Madame Beck, but she also makes it her own, storing personal items there and naming one of the large adjoining trees.[140] Noticed in her reclamation efforts and asked by Madam Beck whether she likes the path, Lucy responds, "Yes…it is quiet and shady" (119-20).

Lucy does not meet with Paul in the first alley scene that she depicts, but she does experience some relief from the alienation that marks many of her days in this new and unfamiliar city. She finds comfort in the moon during this evening visit to her special path, for "she [the moon] and the stars, visible beside her, were no strangers where all else was strange: my childhood knew them. I had seen that golden sign…in Old England, in long past days" (ibid).

---

[140] This space is where she chooses to store (i.e. bury) her treasured letters from Graham Bretton: "Methusaleh, the pear-tree, stood at the further end of this walk, near my seat: he rose up, dim and gray, above the lower shrubs round him…there was a hole, or rather a deep hollow, near his root…hidden partly by ivy and creepers growing thick round; and there I meditated hiding my treasure—I meant also to bury a grief…I cleared away the ivy, and found the hole; it was large enough to receive the jar, and I thrust it deep in" (328).

Protected from the sounds of the city, in the presence of this familiar moon, Lucy returns, imaginatively at least, to a period of far greater connectedness. In this space, "something like an angel — the Ideal — knelt near," assuaging the pain of her current situation (121): "To-night, I was not so mutinous, nor so miserable…the cool peace and dewy sweetness of the night filled me with a mood of hope… a general sense of encouragement and heart-ease" (ibid). The sound of Count de Hamal opening a rare upper window to drop a billet-doux—which Lucy figures as "the rude Real burst[ing] coarsely in"—fractures the "intense stillness" of the soundscape and curtails her sojourn among beloved scenes and persons (122).

Following this scene, which represents a short-lived return to Lucy's pre-"shipwreck" state of inclusion,[141] a series of encounters in this insulated space lays the foundation for her most formative relationship in the novel—that with Paul Emanuel. Lucy's social growth and deepening sense of belonging during her time at the pensionnat derive largely from this one relationship, rather than a web of many ties. Her relationship with Paul comes to serve as a model for the ideal bond between two persons—one that flourishes in silent spaces and finds sustenance in nonverbal communication and wordless presence (385). It is through this relationship, too—namely, through Paul's intercession—that Lucy progresses to the socially-embedded role of directress that she holds at the novel's end.[142] Foregrounding the soundscape

[141] Lucy figures the loss of her family in terms of a shipwreck: "…there must have been a wreck at last…For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished" (39).

[142] Many scholars have noted the developmental importance of Lucy's connection with Paul. Heidi Pennington considers this relationship the culmination of "Lucy's desire to develop her own identity through communion with someone 'dearer to me than myself'" (149), while A.S. Byatt figures their love story as "the coming together of minds"—an "exquisite rarity" in *Villette* (xxxi). Pond speaks specifically to the distinctness of this relationship in terms of silence. She argues that the heroine's use of silence takes "a more positive form" with Paul, and that,

of l'allée défendue in this reading of Paul as mediating figure reveals the continuing import of phenomenal silence for Lucy's social development.

Silence plays a conspicuous role in Lucy and Paul's relationship from its inception. Their intercourse is grounded in ever-closer attention, and an attenuated soundscape guards against the disturbance and distractions that can rupture relatedness. In "Suspensions of Perception," Jonathan Crary argues that attention (i.e. focusing) is historically constructed and that, since the nineteenth century, Western modernity "has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for 'paying attention,' that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli" (166). He points to a "realization" in the late nineteenth century that "attention had limits beyond and below which…social cohesion [was] threatened" (ibid). The sonic events of a busy soundscape have the potential to pull a hearer's attention from the companion or conversation at hand, and thus these stimuli represent a threat to the close attention on which relatedness — as practiced by Lucy and Paul, in particular — is founded. I argue that this awareness had its origins earlier in the century, and that Victorian notions of intimacy became entangled with this emphasis on "paying attention."

Lucy and Paul each see distracted or wandering attention as a detriment to relatedness. Unlike Cohn, who argues for the value of *in*attention in *Villette* (853), I see attentiveness as the

---

gradually, "Lucy's silences shift the rhetorical situation from a struggle for power to the pursuit of relationship" (4, 2). In giving silence a "different emphasis" in Lucy's relationship with Paul—one that aligns holding silence with *listening*—Brontë is able to convey it as "a mode of engagement" (5).

foundational element in Lucy's most important relationships. Terry Eagleton points to Paul's "attractive subtlety of perception" (68),[143] and this subtlety functions best in close and intimate encounters—hence his penchant for meeting Lucy along the forbidden path and his "acute sensitiveness to the annoyance of interruption" (*Villette* 359). Lucy's first mention of Paul foregrounds the subtlety of his attentions. She tells the reader that among her few pieces of clothing she keeps "a certain little bunch of white violets that had once been silently presented to me by a stranger (a stranger to me, for we had never exchanged words)" (132). Though this "stranger" isn't identified as Paul until nearly 300 pages later, the care she takes with this gift—drying the flowers and keeping them "between the folds of [her] best dress"—implies that this first silent offering is a significant event in her emotional life.

Paul's silent presentation of gifts is a main facet of his attentions to Lucy.[144] But with his "mesmeric" glance and speaking looks, it becomes clear that M. Paul is skilled at wordless communication as well.[145] Lucy describes his attentions at the theater as an "influence, mesmeric or otherwise" (147), and elaborates on this facet of his communication style during

---

[143] Lucy gives one description of this on p. 373-4: "in some cases, he had the terrible unerring penetration of instinct, and pierced in its hiding-place the last lurking thought of the heart, and discerned under florid veilings the bare, barren places of the spirit…all that men and women would not have known."

[144] Lucy's main description of this comes on p. 380: "Now I knew, and had long known, that that hand of M. Emanuel's was on intimate terms with my desk; that it raised and lowered the lid, ransacked and arranged the contents, almost as familiarly as my own…I saw the brownie's work, in exercises left over-night full of faults, and found next morning carefully corrected: I profited by his capricious good-will in loans full welcome and refreshing…Impossible to doubt whence these treasures flowed…" (380-1). She mentions again on p. 384: "Amongst the kind brownie's gifts left in my desk, I forgot to enumerate many a paper of chocolate comfits."

[145] Many of the figures in Lucy's narrative use body language and a language of looks to conduct a level of communication beyond speech. As I have suggested above, Lucy, Paul, and other characters' use of these techniques contributes to a silent sociality that is overtly positive—bringing characters together and fostering intimacy—but while this deployment of nonverbal communication complements my argument about the role of phenomenal silence in Victorian sociality, speaking glances and expressive countenances will remain largely tangential to this chapter's aurally-focused reading of *Villette*.

their supposed "final parting," saying, "He took my hand in one of his, with the other he put back my bonnet; he looked into my face, his luminous smile went out, his lips expressed something almost like the wordless language of a mother" (530). Paul is the only figure in the novel explicitly credited with "wordless language," and Lucy's comparison of this ability with that of a mother again draws a line from this silent exchange to a primary, familial stage of intimacy.

While Paul uses covert offerings and knowing glances to win influence with Lucy, she applies silence as the best means of managing and cultivating a relationship with this singular man. With a "most irritable nature glow[ing] in his cheek" on the eve of the school performance, Lucy decides that "silence and attention [is] the best balm to apply" and simply listens (147). It is important to note that she does not draw on silence alone, but on a muteness combined with attention. Later, when Paul takes issue with her frequent outings and worldliness, she again determines that muteness is the proper course of action—"nestling still closer under the wing of silence" (335). But she chooses it in these moments as a form of engagement, a method of negotiation with this "waspish little despot" (336), rather than an expression of avoidance or disengagement. At an even more pivotal moment, when Paul insists that it's not just any friend he seeks in Lucy, but a "close friend…intimate and real — kindred in all but blood" (450), she turns likewise to silence: "I could not answer him in words," she narrates, "yet I suppose I *did* answer him; he took my hand, which found comfort in the shelter of his" (ibid).[146] In this most crucial of times, Lucy cannot find the words. Touch conveys the understanding between them.

[146] This exchange also takes place on the forbidden path.

With their shared emphasis on attention and perception in social engagement, it's fitting that Lucy and Paul's most meaningful meetings—meetings that reveal their increasing levels of attachment and rapport—happen in the pensionnat garden and the acoustically-insulated alley. Shortly after Lucy's experience of solidarity with the evening moon, she gains her first friendship on the same forbidden path. Paul seeks her there and, after some initial repartee, closes their encounter with an offer of alliance: "'Come…we will be friends,' he pursued…'I will aid you sincerely. After all, you are solitary and a stranger…We will be friends: do you agree?'" (172). Lucy confesses herself "glad of a friend" (ibid), and their relationship grows steadily in response to this more formal pledge of goodwill. At their next meeting in l'allée défendue, Paul reaffirms Lucy's need "of a careful friend"—as well as "watching over"—and pledges himself to "discharge both duties" (402-3). It is during this scene, too, that he pronounces his and Lucy's "rapport," "affinity," and entanglement, and warns that any "sudden breaks" in the entwined threads of their destinies will "leave damage in the web" (407).

The pair's final interview in this hushed space represents a significant advance in their relationship, extending their former theme of friendship into something more definitely intimate. After a month of "quiet lessons"—with Paul providing "mute, indulgent help" and "affection and deep esteem and dawning trust…each fasten[ing] its bond" between them (488)—he joins her again for her evening walk in the alley. Lucy asks herself, in the course of their stroll, "Could it be that he was becoming more than friend or brother? Did his look speak a kindness beyond fraternity or amity?" (ibid). His "interpreting lips" stir but do not pronounce an

answer—Beck breaks into the stillness of the alley to interrupt the moment (ibid). As is often the case, however, there is an unspoken understanding between the two.[147]

2 La Terasse: Snowbound Sociality and Lucy's Cave Under the Sea

When Lucy's social isolation hits a critical point over the long vacation—in the absence of Paul and all other pensionnat instructors—she seeks community among worshippers in the "holy quiet" (178) of a Catholic Church. During the loss of consciousness that follows this scene, however, she is removed to a location far more likely to provide the companionship and "heart-ease" that she seeks: John and Louisa Bretton's Villette home, La Terrasse. Other scholars have noted the resemblance this house bears to the original Bretton home, but the similitude extends beyond the furniture and knick-knacks that have been shipped across the channel. La Terrasse is as quiet as the home in Bretton that suited Lucy so well. Without delving specifically into its sonic properties, Glen describes La Terrasse as "cushioned, carpeted, insulated against the shocks of the outside world" (207). Richard Bonfiglio suggests that this domestic realm is just what Lucy needs it to be, arguing that Brontë "mold[s] the homely spaces [of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*] to the affective needs of their…protagonists" (601).

Lucy finds comfort in both the society and the soundscape here, welcomed by old friends and ensconced in an environment that again recalls her childhood. Of Louisa Bretton, she says:

[147] Lucy also admits her love for Paul during a moment marked by silence. Walking back from the fête, as the moon's "glory and her silence triumphed" (517), she characterizes her feelings for him as, "another [kind of] love, venturing diffidently into life after long acquaintance, furnace-tried by pain, stamped by constancy, consolidated by affection's pure and durable alloy, submitted by intellect to intellect's own tests, and finally wrought up…to his own unflawed completeness, this Love that laughed at Passion, his fast frenzies and his hot and hurried extinction, in *this* Love I had a vested interest; and whatever tended either to its culture or its destruction, I could not view impassibly" (ibid).

"it is not everybody, even amongst our respected friends and esteemed acquaintance, whom we like to have near us…It is not every friend whose eye is a light in a sick room, whose presence is there a solace: but all this was Mrs. Bretton to me; all this she had ever been" (201). Louisa's presence is as "beneficial to [Lucy] as the atmosphere of some salubrious climate" (ibid)—putting it in contrast to the dangerous atmospheres ushered in by the storms she has experienced—and the sonic insulation of her little room is equally salutary. After comparing the "calm little room" in which she convalesces to a "cave in the sea" (202), she gives an extended description of its sound-buffering capacity that invites comparison with l'allée défendue:

> When I closed my eyes, I heard a gale, subsiding at last, bearing upon the house-front like a settling swell upon a rock-base. I heard it drawn and withdrawn far, far off, like a tide retiring from a shore of the upper world — a world so high above that the rush of its largest waves, the dash of its fiercest breakers could sound down in this submarine home, only like murmurs and a lullaby. (203)

Lucy is aware of the gales, waves, and breakers that dash the world "above," but this "submarine home" protects her from life's usual disturbances—whether they be unwelcome noise or the pang of loneliness. Her comparison of the sounds that *do* reach her to "murmurs" or a "lullaby" recalls the aural experience of childhood and implies a maternal, or at least a familial, source; where there is a lullaby there is generally a caregiver.

During the long process of Lucy's physical and mental recovery, La Terrasse becomes the scene of her greatest experiences of social entwinedness to date. One such occasion follows a heavy snowfall near Christmastime. It is an episode that highlights the resonance between the often-silent Lucy Snowe and the weather condition for which she is named, and it reinforces the association between snow and sonic insulation set forth in Chapter One. Just as falling snow in

Bleak House is distinct from London's creeping fogs, so snow in *Villette* is quite different in its sonic and social significance from ice or, more importantly, *frost*.

While Brontë entertained other possible titles for *Villette*, she also considered another surname for her protagonist. "Snowe" won out over "Frost" in the later stages of composition, requiring alterations to be made throughout the manuscript's first two volumes.[148] Glen and Katherine Kim discuss the significance of Lucy Snowe's Christian name, with its connection to "the language of vision" (Glen 223) and its resonances of illumination and "defective sight" (ibid),[149] but Lucy's surname is equally resonant. Scholars who discuss the surname "Snowe" often cite Brontë's stipulation in a letter to W. S. Williams that her heroine must have "a cold name" (emphasis original),[150] but none have delved into Brontë's final preference for Snowe over Frost.

The equally "cold" substances of snow, ice, and frost figure frequently in Lucy's narrative and carry very different resonances. Snow proves a more fitting signifier for her in the end because, like Lucy, it is ostensibly cold—cold as far as the external senses can perceive—yet its insulating presence ultimately generates social and emotional warmth in the novel. Ice and frost,

---

[148] In a letter to W. S. Williams on 6 November 1852, Charlotte writes: "As to the name of the heroine...at first—I called her 'Lucy Snowe'…which 'Snowe' I afterward changed to 'Frost'. Subsequently—I rather regretted the change and wished it 'Snowe' again: if not too late—I should like the alteration to be made now throughout the M.S." Editor Margaret Smith's footnote to this letter explains, "Lucy's surname is 'Frost' in the first two volumes of the fair copy MS, but in the early chapters of vol. iii CB altered 'Frost' to 'Snowe'. The printers were instructed to print 'Snowe' throughout."

[149] Lucy's association with defective sight is interesting for the purposes of a sound-sensitive reading, especially considering that Brontë claimed her own short-sightedness made her ear "very acute" (letter to Ellen Nussey, 26 September 1836). In her interpretation of the name, Glen asserts that "Brontë must have known that St. Lucy, usually portrayed with her eyes upon a plate, is the patron saint of those with defective sight" (223). In "Corpse Hoarding: Control and the Female Body in Bluebeard, Schalken the Painter, and *Villette*," on the other hand, Kim highlights the connection between the name "Lucy" and the Latin word for light, "lux" (8).

[150] See letter cited in FN 148.

meanwhile, continue to stand for the invisible divisions between people across a series of images.[151] This resonance between "Snowe" and snow plays out in one of Lucy's most treasured memories, when she, the Brettons, and the de Bassompierres (née Homes) are snowbound in the Bretton home (314). The snowbound scenes are defined by a nexus of outer coldness, inner warmth, and profound quiet. Snow's insulating presence around the Bretton home after a winter storm inspires silence and sociality among its inhabitants, while the utter at-homeness that Lucy feels in this period invites further comparison between such a substance and her own person.

This series of scenes begins when Graham Bretton and the Count de Bassompierre escape from a "snow-blast" outside and join Lucy, Polly, and Mrs. Bretton within La Terrasse (310)—a location already associated with sonic insulation during Lucy's earliest days of recovery.[152] The two men, who appear as "two mountains of snow" (ibid), are compared to polar bears, frozen showers, and avalanches in a scene marked by merriment, warmth, and the rekindling of old friendships—a rekindling in which Lucy Snowe is unmistakably included. She shares in a symbolic Christmas wassail-cup, for example, while M. de Bassompierre acknowledges her as a familiar acquaintance. She describes his verbal and physical extension of

[151] As Lucy and Graham's relationship begins to deepen in Volume II after her illness, she describes how "an invisible, but a cold something, very slight, very transparent, but very chill: a sort of screen of ice had hitherto…glazed the medium through which we exchanged intercourse" (214). A "few warm words," she recounts, "breathed on that frail frost-work of reserve; about this time, it gave note of dissolution" (214). Similarly, Lucy's first full description of the adult Paulina Home de Bassompierre, whose sensitivity and acute self-consciousness handicap her expressions of social warmth, mentions that "a thin glazing of the ice of pride polished this delicate exterior, and her lip wore a curl" (293). Finally, in an image that Elisha Cohn highlights in "Still Life: Suspended Animation in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," Lucy compares the "inward winter" of a hermit's social isolation to a dormouse "preserv[ed]…in ice for the season" (295). Snowe speculates, "the frost may get into his heart and never thaw more" (296). For hermit and mouse, ice and frost have the potential to destroy one's chances at, and eventually one's capacity for, connection.

[152] I refer to the day Lucy spends at La Terrasse after she awakens from unconsciousness, when she compares her room in the home to a cave under the sea (202-3)—an image that the latter half of this section will take up. See also Glen's description of La Terrasse as "cushioned, carpeted, insulated against the shocks of the outside world" (207).

friendship, explaining, "Mr. Home…held his hand out to me, saying kindly, 'he remembered me well; and, even had his own memory been less trustworthy, my name was so often on his daughter's lips, and he had listened to so many long tales about me, I should seem like an old acquaintance'" (312).

On the following day, when "egress seem[s] next to impossible" (314), the snowstorm's sonic and social influences become clearer. Lucy acknowledges, "That morning I was disposed for silence: the austere fury of the winter-day, had on me an awing, hushing influence…the storm had raved itself hoarse, but seemed no nearer exhaustion" (321). The "hoarse" phase of this storm sets it in contrast to earlier storms, notable for their unending and insalubrious noise. It is during this period that Lucy recognizes a rare capacity for silence in Polly that matches her own:

> Paulina and I kept silence for some time; we both took out some work, and plied a mute and diligent task…Had Ginevra Fanshawe been my companion in that morning-room, she would not have suffered me to muse and listen undisturbed…Paulina Mary cast once or twice towards me a quiet, but penetrating glance of her dark, full eye; her lips half opened, as if to the impulse of coming utterance: but she saw and delicately respected my inclination for silence. 'This will not hold long,' I thought to myself…but the peculiarity of this little scene was, that she *said* nothing: she could feel, without pouring out her feelings in a flux of words. (320-22)

What Lucy finds most striking and appealing in her companion is a respect for silence that exists alongside a crucial capacity for feeling and an ability to express those feelings without "a flux of words" (322). Polly's eyes and "half opened" lips communicate both her interest in engaging with Lucy and her respect for Lucy's personal inclinations.[153]

[153] As this scene makes clear, Polly is as sensitive, perceptive, and adroit at holding silence as Lucy herself. At a later moment, she begs her father to tell Graham Bretton "not to mind my being silent" (333). "Say that it is my way," she instructs, "and that I have no unfriendly intention" (ibid). Lucy admits of Polly at a later occasion, "I liked her. It is not a declaration I have often made concerning my acquaintance, in the course of this book" (411).

Lucy continues to mark Polly and the day at hand by their soundlessness, as M. de Bassompierre's carriage rolls "softly [away] through the snow"[154] and his daughter commences a watch of the "stillest sort" with "quite noiseless step"—a "velvet march" (322). Lucy describes the way in which Polly consults "the night sounds" in anticipation of his return, but she makes an interesting correction to her own narration: "I should rather say," she quickly amends, "the night silence" (322). It is a lasting silence that Polly consults, rather than the usual urban noise and bustle. These muted scenes lay the foundation for a number of budding relationships—among them, Lucy and Polly's friendship and Graham and Polly's courtship—and anticipate a period of intense social activity for Lucy. She maintains a cluster of key attachments after these snowy days spent with the Brettons and de Bassompierres and spends more time out in Villette society than ever before. As she summarizes, "From this date my life did not want variety" (324).

Snow makes other appearances in the narrative, as a personal signifier for Lucy—whose hair, when she writes, is "white, under a white cap, like snow beneath snow" (51)—and as a figure for sound reduction,[155] but these scenes provide the best illustration of the silence and sociality that it can foster. La Terrasse plays a similarly amended role after this point, as Lucy returns to the pensionnat and the power struggle that this carefully surveilled environment comes to represent. Lucy's time in the pensionnat spans the largest part of the novel, forming an

[154] Lucy notes the usual nosiness of carriages in a scene that contrasts with this one. As she argues with Ginevra on a carriage ride, she notes, "It was well that the carriage-wheels made a tremendous rattle over the flinty Villette pavement, for I can assure the reader there was neither dead silence nor calm discussion within the vehicle" (356).
[155] When Lucy walks through the city to Madame Walraven's, she observes that a "thick snow-descent…sweeps a great capital clean before you; it makes you a quiet path through broad, grand streets" (429). And another time, as Lucy listens for the sound of Paul's presence in the pensionnat, she compares her listening self to "the evening and winter-wolf, snuffing the snow" (490).

envelope around this formative period at La Terrasse, and it is from within the pensionnat's walls that she steps into her final and most developed social role: as directress and perennial fiancée.

3 Aural Surveillance and Sonic Control at Madame Beck's "Pensionnat de Demoiselles"

A master of intimating without *voicing*,[156] Lucy Snowe employs nonverbal communication as her primary means of respecting and maintaining the silent spaces she finds so fruitful. Whether it is her eyes, facial muscles, or even her pen that do the "speaking," Snowe privileges extraverbal forms of expression to an extent rarely seen among Victorian characters. Her narrative takes this ability to communicate without speech for granted, as various characters demonstrate their own methods for implying without vocalizing. Pensionnat directress Modeste Beck, however, uses a diverse array of material methods to maintain strict control of her school's sonic environment.

Beyond Lucy Snowe's frequent decisions *not* to speak and her careful tending of l'allée défendue, most of the techniques and technologies that produce silence in *Villette* can be found in the hands of Madame Beck—a character whose connection to surveillance and intrigue makes her an unlikely impetus for positive social growth. Nevertheless, Beck's machinations are almost entirely responsible for the tenor and character of the lively social relations at her pensionnat and, in the end, even her efforts to separate lovers such as Lucy and Paul drive the respective figures closer together. While Lucy—and presumably Brontë—finds Beck's methods distasteful, the directress's use of silent space for information gathering and in the regulation of her

[156] As she relates yet another disagreement with Ginevra, for example, Lucy explains to the reader, "I delegated the trouble of commenting on this 'yes' to my countenance; or rather, my under-lip voluntarily anticipated my tongue; of course, reverence and solemnity were not the feelings expressed in the look I gave her" (342). Lucy implies that this ability to express sentiments via countenance is more natural to her—more at-the-ready—than her powers of articulation. Her under-lip operates autonomously and *preempts* the tongue, rendering it unnecessary.

personal network has important social repercussions. Beck's deft management of her school's soundscape through a range of technologies of silence represents the most significant deployment of silence by a character in the novel—a deployment that has implications for Lucy Snowe's larger trajectory.

Lucy defines Madame Beck by her noiselessness from their very first encounter in the rue Fossette. As she awaits the directress in her salon, she's startled by a voice and "almost bound[s], so unexpected was the sound; so certain had [she] been of solitude" (71). Lucy soon recognizes how Beck managed to come upon her unaware: "She had entered by a little door behind me, and, being shod with the shoes of silence, I had heard neither her entrance nor approach" (72). This introduction is the first of many mentions of Beck's "soundless slippers" (79), "souliers de silence" (81), or "shoes of silence" (93), as Lucy variously terms them. These slippers enable Beck to move about her boarding school "without perceptible sound" (76)—"noiseless as a shadow" (77)—and, in so doing, to gather vital information about her boarders, their activities, and their relations with others.

Beck superintends the social traffic in this environment in an equally silent manner. She dictates the very milieu in which *Villette*'s characters exist, determining who remains and who will "vanish" without explanation (80). The "mass of machinery" that she "regulate[s]" through such means is in fact a body of persons: more than one hundred day-pupils and a "score" of boarders, "together with four teachers, eight masters, six servants, and three children," as well as the parents and friends of her students (80). None are free from her spying, from her influence over and interference in their every relation. After a surreptitious meeting with Dr. John, Lucy admits, "it was next to impossible that a casket could be thrown into her garden, or

an interloper could cross her walks…without that she, in shaken branch, passing shade, unwonted footfall, or stilly murmur…should have caught intimation" (127). Of the four "signals" that might alert Beck to an unauthorized message or a stranger's presence, three are sounds. According to Lucy's generalization, Beck is three times more likely to be notified of intrusion by her ears than her eyes, but such absolute surveillance is only possible in a sonic environment free from interfering noises.

Soundless shoes are not the only means of silence and espionage at Madame Beck's disposal. She also arranges and modifies her built environment to guard against inopportune noises. Lucy herself benefits on multiple occasions from doors that "like every other door in [the] house, revolved noiselessly on well-oiled hinges" (130). On the night of her drug-induced excursion, she highlights the pensionnat's facilitation of covert movement: "there offered not so much as a creaking hinge or a clicking latch…there is no lock on the huge, heavy, porte-cochere… it fastens with a sort of spring-bolt…which, from within, may be noiselessly withdrawn" (498).[157] Lucy escapes by such means to the "gay, living, joyous crowd" (499) at the fête—an event with material consequences for her romantic future[158]—and discovers that she is not the only one to have done so. The contrivances that enabled her stealth function by Beck's design and for Beck's special advantage: "often, when we thought Madame in her chamber, sleeping, she was gone,

[157]Lucy fixates on sound in this scene: "Hush! - the clock strikes. Ghostly deep as is the stillness of this convent…While my ear follows to silence the hum of the last stroke, I catch faintly from the built-out capital, a sound like bells…"

[158] It's on this occasion that Lucy discovers that Paul is still in Villette (513). Listening intently, she "gathers that his voyage had been temporarily deferred of his own will…and had taken his berth in the 'Paul et Virginie,' appointed to sail a fortnight later" (514). Deceived by what she *sees* between Paul and Justine Marie, she also reveals the depth of her feelings for Paul to her reader: "This was not like enduring the endearments of Dr. John and Paulina, against which while I sealed my eyes and my ears, while I withdrew thence my thoughts, my sense of harmony still acknowledged in it a charm. This was an outrage…in *this* Love I had a vested interest" (517).

full-dressed, to take her pleasure at operas, or plays, or balls" (507). Both women enter society on their own terms by securing noiseless departures from the pensionnat's bounds.

When Beck's meticulous control of the pensionnat soundscape fails, sound disrupts her usual methods of information gathering and relationship management. In one instance, an irrepressible sneeze and the subsequent click of a latch as she eavesdrops on Lucy and Dr. John interrupts an imminent disclosure, thwarting not only Madame Beck's desire for knowledge, but also Lucy's and the reader's as well. Bretton is about to reveal the identity of his beloved "angel"—a pupil in Beck's pensionnat—when "the latch of Madame Beck's chamber-door…gave a sudden click…[and] there was the suppressed explosion of an irrepressible sneeze" (138). Bretton is "routed" in the middle of his most suspenseful line—"I allude, of course —" (ibid)—foreclosing any chance that Lucy, Beck, or the reader will learn the name of his secret lover. Lucy gibes, "These little accidents will happen to the best of us…If she had not sneezed, she would have heard all, and so should I; but that unlucky sternutation routed Dr. John" (ibid). Beck forfeits valuable intelligence with this mishap, and it costs her the opportunity to influence or interfere in a romantic entanglement transpiring within her walls.

The final technology of silence that Beck deploys in her management of persons is an opiate. According to Victoria Berridge, opium was widely used for quietening infants in the Victorian period, as the names of popular opium derivatives such as "Mother's Friend" (a colloquial name for Godfrey's Cordial) and Mother Bailey's Quieting Syrup suggest (Berridge 440). When Lucy awaits communication from an absent Paul and refuses to relax her watch, Madame offers—and covertly administers—a "sedative" (Brontë 493):"Ah!" Lucy observes, "the sedative had been administered. In fact, they had given me a strong opiate. I was to be held

quiet for one night" (496). The opiate does succeed in holding her "quiet"—in the sense that she remains silent during her lengthy excursion—but the drug does not separate her from society or those she loves. Instead, it propels her out among the living masses and into Paul's immediate vicinity, sparking her recognition, "in *this* Love I had a vested interest" (517). As Lucy says of Beck's failed opiate, "its result was not that she intended…I became alive to new thought" (496).

Ultimately, Beck's promotion and use of silence at the pensionnat—whether beneficent or malicious in intent, meant to foster connections among others or to disrupt them—are positive in the sense that they have a measurable impact on the members of her social network. Her slippers, door hinges, spring-locks, and sedatives all forward social processes; they keep the mass of human machinery running. Those, like Lucy, who ultimately triumph from within Beck's modulated environment must outwit her at her own games of surveillance and sonic control.

Attention to diegetic silence in *Villette* opens new avenues for reading both the "crétin" with whom Lucy spends the long vacation and the nun that dogs Lucy through much of the novel. While these figures seem to lend themselves to the more limited conceptions of silence that have prevailed in scholarship thus far—as either blank and vacuous in nature, or synonymous with repression—I argue that these motifs actually reflect the novel's preoccupation with socially productive silence.

Lucy's disdain for her silent companion and dismay during the long vacation have little to do with her perspective on phenomenal silence. Instead, her distress during this period stems

primarily from the absence of other people.[159] Though silence and alienation come hand in hand during this period—similar to Brontë's own experience at the parsonage in 1850—it is the lack of social connection rather than the silence of her environment that disturbs her. In recalling the event, she details the emptying out of persons, as first Madame Beck, then the teachers, Paul, and nearly every student takes "refuge" among friends (172). After recounting this exodus, she admits, "My heart almost died within me; miserable longings strained its chords" (172-3). Lucy's heart strains not for the *sounds* of human life around her, which on many occasions she would just as soon do without, but for the warmth and affection that her life so often lacks. Her ailment is "a want of companionship" (175).

These painful days are admittedly silent, yet her mention of silence carries a qualifier that directs attention and responsibility back to the lack of human connection: "How long were the September days! How silent, how lifeless! How vast and void seemed the desolate premises!" (173). The lifelessness of these September days follows immediately upon and modifies their silence in this sentence. Silent encounters and environments prove very lively in other parts of *Villette*, when persons such as Graham Bretton and Paul Emanuel are present, but the premises are now "void" and "desolate" (ibid). Lucy relies on images of barrenness to depict her solitary experience, describing her life as a "hopeless desert: tawny sands, with no green field, no palm-tree, no well in view" (ibid). It is a space devoid not only of sentient life, but of all living things.

[159] Lucy states quite clearly on p. 175: "a want of companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine." She later finds comfort in the presence of worshippers at a Catholic church, and participating in confession that evening affords her "the…relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient" (179).

Lucy's dissatisfaction with her "strange, deformed companion" during this break (174) and her relief when the crétin departs have a similar cast. Although this pupil "very rarely spoke" (ibid), Lucy resents her lack of sentience rather than her muteness. Per her description, the crétin lacks all capacity to feel, reason, discern, or express: Being in her presence was "more like being prisoned with some strange tameless animal, than associating with a human being" (ibid). Faces are infinitely communicative throughout *Villette*—eyes and facial muscles convey far more between characters than spoken words do—making Lucy's revulsion at the way in which this pupil "distort[s] her features with indescribable grimaces" very telling (174). Hours spent examining a face that *says* nothing and is indescribable in its expressions produce a "mental pain…far more wasting and wearing" than anything else Lucy has to endure at the time (ibid).

The crétin is a tantalizing symbol and ultimately a mockery of the human companionship that Brontë's protagonist craves and cannot have. Lucy takes issue with "her brain, her eyes, her ears, [and] her heart [which] slept content; they could not wake to work, so lethargy was their Paradise" (173)—not, noticeably, with any of the girl's organs of speech. It is this companion's complete inability to form impressions, receive communications, or share sentiments—whether through speech, eye contact, or any other means—that makes her a "heavy charge" (174). It is a very deficient creature indeed who is utterly incapable of nonverbal communication in the world of *Villette*. Lucy's declaration in a later scene that "no words could inspire a pleasanter content than did M. Paul's wordless presence" (385) throws the distinction between a wordless and a witless companion into relief. She does not admire or rely on the faculty of speech very often—for, "Who has words at the right moment?" (345)—and she never requires it of others, but

Snowe is deeply biased in favor of those with keen perception (or "sensitivity," as she often calls it) and expressive features. It is *those* figures who can yet communicate when words fail.

Villette's nun—a figure later revealed to be the wily Count de Hamal in disguise—is a device that has fired the scholarly imagination for decades. From Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to Toni Wein and Caroline Franklin, many scholars have given compelling psychological readings of the nun,[160] while others such as Glen take a more materialist perspective on this "ghostly" figure. For Glen, "the world configured in *Villette* is one bounded by materiality" (234), and she reads Brontë's nun as "concrete unromantic evidence of a love affair in which [Lucy] has no part" (201). Following her line of argument, I suggest that Brontë's careful placement of the "nun" sightings and her eventual debunking of this figure encourage an understanding of it as the material signifier of a transpiring tryst. It is a visible, tangible, and notoriously silent harbinger of elopement. Breaking with Braun, however, I argue that the nun's regular appearance after developments in Lucy's own romantic relationships—as well as Lucy's inheritance of the disguise from the eloping couple—suggests that Lucy is more deeply implicated in this particular plot development. [161] The overlaying of de Hamal's exploits with Lucy's romantic advances in shared

[160] Wein gives a useful overview of scholarship on Brontë's nun in her book chapter, "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*" (2003): "To Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the nun is a projection of Lucy's need for nullity; for Eve Sedgwick, the nun dramatizes Lucy's constitutive need for doubleness. Christina Crosby detects the nun as mirroring the narcissistic Lacanian Imaginary Other. To some, the nun represents Brontë's anticlericalism; while Q. D. Leavis…saw the nun as nothing more than a plot device for maintaining suspense and for generating sales" (172). Wein reads the nun as a "figure through which erotic desire becomes buoyantly disembodied and endlessly deferred" and connects it to Matthew Lewis's character, Agnes, in *The Monk* (ibid).

[161] Lucy finds the nun's clothes in her bed after her midnight excursion to the summer-park, along with a note from the nun/de Hamal that reads: "The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe her wardrobe. She will be seen in the Rue Fossette no more" (519).

spaces such as the attic and alley reinforces the import of such spaces for these extrajudicial romantic entanglements.

Lucy's first encounter with the nun occurs just as she enjoys the "bliss" of reading Dr. John's first letter to her in the pensionnat attic (273). She goes to great lengths to describe the cessation of noise that precedes her reading of the letter, noting, "all was still in the house…the noisy recreation-hour past…the quiet lamp of study was lit…the clashing door and clamorous bell hushed for the evening" (271). Only then does Lucy "mount noiseless to the dormitory" to retrieve her prize (ibid), and venture, further yet, to the "silent landing" of the garret (272). Only there, "trembling with sweet impatience," will she indulge in reading the letter (ibid). This correspondence represents the first substantive interaction between Lucy and a potential love interest that the reader is privy to, and it closes with Brontë's introduction of the "nun": that material sign of Ginevra's unfolding affair—a presence that Lucy hears before she sees.[162]

While I am not suggesting an oversimplified correspondence between these two sets of relations in the novel—one of which is overtly amorous and the other a tenuous friendship that exists largely on paper—the overlapping of these figures and events has implications that can be read in both directions. Rather than representing sexual or other forms of suppression, the nun's silent presence indicates an ongoing dalliance as well as concrete steps taken toward a future union—as both Lucy and the reader will later realize. Its regular appearance after developments in Lucy's own social life underlines its signification of unsanctified relations gestating in Beck's

[162] After reading the letter, Lucy asks, "What was near me? … Something in that vast solitary garret sounded strangely. Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess…" (273).

pensionnat. Conversely, the nun/de Hamal's appearance at various stages in Lucy's romantic evolution suggests that *her* maneuverings, too, are conscious and deliberate attempts to solidify an attachment with a potential partner. Their continuous run-ins and intertwining plotlines reveal that Lucy and her "nun" are up to the same task—utilizing the same insulated spaces.

In her muteness, anonymity, and association with snow imagery, this "woman" has much in common with Brontë's protagonist.[163] Their final brush transpires in l'allée défendue, on an evening that evinces Lucy's growing connection to Paul Emanuel. Lucy and Paul witness this "strange sight" (407) at the end of a scene that portrays her transfer of affection from Graham to Paul.[164] As the only two characters who ever *see* the nun, its puzzling existence is one of the things that bonds them. He observes, immediately before their shared sighting, "Whether this nun be flesh and blood, or something that remains when blood is dried and flesh wasted, her business is as much with you as with me" (408). The nun's "business," as it were, is partly as an outward sign and reinforcement of the bond that is maturing between them.

The nun—signal of forbidden romance and double for Lucy[165]—shares Lucy's penchant for non-sonic means of communication. It is primarily through these means that Ginevra and de Hamal manage to beat Beck at her own game, maneuvering successfully within a preternaturally

---

[163] Lucy's most detailed description of the nun comes during a sighting in the alley: "I stood about three yards from a tall, sable-robed, snowy-veiled woman. Five minutes passed. I neither fled nor shrieked. She was there still. I spoke…She stood mute. She had no face — no features" (329).

[164] The scene opens with allusions to her "warm affection" for Dr. John and the "unquiet" tomb of her feelings for him (401), but when she bids a firm "Good night" to his memory—accidentally aloud—she receives a "good evening" from Paul in response (402). Their conversation leads to his pronouncement, "I was conscious of a rapport between you and myself…Yes, you were born under my star! Tremble! for where that is the case with mortals, the threads of their destinies are difficult to disentangle" (407).

[165] Helen Cooper, editor of the 2004 Penguin edition of *Villette*, calls the nun "Lucy Snowe's 'other'" in her introduction to the novel.

still soundscape. The illicit nature of Ginevra and de Hamal's relationship requires them to reach beyond verbal means and employ other creative methods, making the "nun" quite communicative for all her silence. De Hamal occasionally drops ill-fated "missiles" and gifts for Ginevra into the pensionnat garden,[166] but the couple's main form of communication is the silent waving of a white handkerchief. This form of signaling slips past Beck's largely sonic surveillance, but Lucy witnesses it on multiple occasions:

> …my eyes, fixed on the tall houses bounding the garden, saw the one lattice…cautiously open; forth from the aperture projected a hand and a white handkerchief; both waved. I know not whether the signal was answered from some viewless quarter of our own dwelling; but immediately after there fluttered from the lattice a falling object. (136)

De Hamal finds his noisily dropped notes intercepted, but the "signal" of the white handkerchief never fails in its function. It is a line of communication that is never fully decoded or interrupted.

When Ginevra and de Hamal finally elope, Lucy finds the nun's clothing in her bed. She inherits, as it were, the material means through which the lovers pursued a relationship outside Beck's jurisdiction. In the intense "hush" and "stillness" of the dormitory, she spies "stretched on [her] bed the old phantom — the NUN…To the head-bandage was pinned a slip of paper: … 'The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe her wardrobe. She will be seen in the rue Fossette no more'" (519). The nun's essential materiality finally becomes apparent, as Lucy notes that "the garments in very truth…were genuine nun's garments" and finds herself "relieved from all sense of the spectral and unearthly" (519-20). The riddle is not fully solved, however, and Lucy's role in

[166] The first occasion is on p. 122, when something drops from a tree to Lucy's feet: "the missile was a box, a small box of white and colored ivory…within [was]…a closely-folded bit of pink paper, a note." Next, when Lucy is again in the forbidden alley, "there fluttered from the lattice a falling object, white and light — billet the second" (136).

the sequence is not yet played out. She places the nun's garb beneath her pillow—determined to outplay Beck and the scheming cabal through her own silent means.

4 Reigning Silence: Lucy's Home in the Faubourg Clotilde

Lucy and Paul's carefully nurtured bond becomes the vehicle through which Lucy transcends her position at Beck's pensionnat. The pair's most consequential and intimate scenes transpire in the Faubourg Clotilde, as they examine the new residence that Paul has secured for her. It is a structure that resembles the original Bretton home and l'allée défendue—two of Lucy's most treasured places—while projecting the role that she will step into as steward and directress of her own establishment. Lucy's social maturation becomes the topic of discussion as she and Paul make their way through the town,[167] until they reach a "very neat abode" situated in the middle of a "clean Faubourg" (534).

The cleanliness of this city street recalls the "clean and ancient town of Bretton" from the narrative's opening page, with the "fine antique street" and "clean" pavement that border the original Bretton home (7). In addition to the home's pleasing neatness, silence marks this space from the moment of their entrance. As Lucy asserts, "Silence reigned in this dwelling" (534). Hand selected and renovated over three weeks by Paul, Lucy's new establishment is l'allée défendue reincarnate: a double for that cherished location over which Lucy can take

[167] Lucy acknowledges a newfound freedom from society's superficial judgments, recalling: "I knew what I was for *him*; and what I might be for the rest of the world, I ceased painfully to care" (533). Meanwhile, Paul broaches the subject of her vocational autonomy, asking whether she still considers "trying to be independent and keeping a little school of [her] own" (ibid).

ownership.[168] A lush buffer of greenery encloses the house, "with vines trained about the [window] panes, tendrils, and green leaves kissing the glass" (ibid).

The residential portion of this multipurpose structure is also carpeted and cushioned like the Bretton home Lucy finds so pleasant. Paul calls this little dwelling a "nutshell," highlighting its insulating capabilities and its connection to the natural world, while an open lattice with "outer air breathing through" makes it—like the Pensionnat alley—a liminal space that is both indoor and outdoor.[169] In the inner regions of this new home, Lucy comes upon her own "parlor" (ibid)—a place for social calls and intimate conversations, to be used much as she has used "her" alley (488). "Half-awed by the deep-pervading hush" around her, Lucy tempers her voice to a whisper, and even Paul speaks quietly (535).

Paul Emanuel can be as verbose a man as any, but in this space and about this venture—securing Lucy both home and workplace—he maintains a "pleased silence" (536). Lucy recalls that in answer to her exclamations and excited questions, "he would not speak" (ibid), and she points to the crudeness of language and speech in these moments. Her feelings of gratitude and pleasure "struggled for expression" through the lamentable vehicle of "such inadequate language," and she deems speech "brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice" (537). The spoken word cannot deliver these feelings; it "dissolved or shivered in the effort [to express]" (ibid). Grappling with unwieldy language, Lucy turns instead to touch, "caress[ing]" his cuff and "strok[ing]" his hand (536-7). Paul makes use of touch and proximity in his turn, stroking her hair and brushing her lips "in passing" (ibid).

---

[168] Paul Emanuel may be the financial investor in this space, but Lucy is the caretaker and sole proprietor.
[169] Anita Levy also reads this home as a liminal space—one which "exists curiously between two worlds" (409).

As Anita Levy has argued, the schoolroom within this house is the place where Lucy "emerge[s] as a social figure with a distinct mission" (410). Her introduction to this space—and the ensuing afternoon with Paul—form the climax of her social progression in the narrative: She gains a dwelling place that reflects, nourishes, and bolsters her painstakingly forged social identity, as well as a partner in both her work and life. On this afternoon in the Faubourg Clotilde, Lucy experiences the ideal in human relations, enjoying "the unemulous ray of pure love" (538) and benefiting from Paul's "silent, strong, effective goodness" (536). Bonfiglio calls Lucy's home "the real hero of the novel," because it—rather than any individual—"emerges as the central point of contact between the fungibility of liberal self-cultivation and an expanding sense of the world" (614). It is a crucial space for social maturation, representing not seclusion or isolation but rather contact with and awareness of the outside world.

The "shy joy" that Lucy feels in her new role as hostess resembles that of an expectant bride, and the whole of the meal that she prepares is sensual, comprised mainly of chocolate and "fresh summer fruit, cherries and strawberries bedded in green leaves" (ibid). Paul's voice, meanwhile, is "so modulated" that it harmonizes with "the silver whisper" and the "musical sigh" of their surroundings (538). The balcony where they sit, "under the screening vines" (537-8), again recalls Bretton and the familial home there, with its "balcony outside, looking down on a fine antique street" (7).

Lucy's depiction of this shared repast amidst new gardens—the "gardens of the faubourg" (538), rather than the garden of the pensionnat—articulates the full extent of their connectedness:

> Near me as he now sat, strongly and closely as he had long twined his life in mine — far as had progressed, and near as was achieved our minds' and affections' assimilation — the very suggestion of interference, of heart-separation, could be heard only with a fermenting excitement, an impetuous throe, a disdainful resolve, an ire, a resistance of which no human eye or cheek could hide the flame. (540).

Her description of their bond reads as a defiance of anyone—Beck included—who might dare to separate them. Her references to entwinement and assimilation echo Paul's description of their affinity in l'allée défendue, but much progression has taken place across the encounters examined above, and now Lucy characterizes herself as "penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection… preferr[ing] him before all humanity" (542). She has finally achieved the union she so greatly desired: "Lucy," Paul intones, "take my love. One day share my life" (541).

5 Silence, Absence, and "Wordless Presence"

Paul's departure for Guadeloupe the next day would seem to present some difficulty for a relationship that has flourished largely through speaking looks, touch, and contented proximity. The two lovers do maintain a fulfilling connection through letter-writing—indeed, Lucy calls his letters "real food that nourished, living water that refreshed" and claims that these three years of separation were "the happiest…of [her] life" (543)—but I argue that Paul's remove, whether to the West Endies or the afterlife, reflects Brontë's contemplation of an intimacy that does not rely on written language or proximity. The possibility of experiencing togetherness with one who is neither verbally[170] nor materially present was pertinent to her own life, as communication with figures like Constantin Heger and her beloved siblings became untenable. Paul's indeterminate

[170] I.e. Present in the form of their written language, through letters.

status at the end of *Villette* enables Brontë to probe the distinction between absence and presence, using Lucy's earlier experiences of silent sociality as models for the satisfying nature of her relationship with Paul even after his open-ended disappearance.

Recent scholarship offers more positive readings of Paul's fate, many of which rely on an interpretation of Lucy and Paul's relationship as something infinite and boundary-crossing. Hayward insists that Paul "has to disappear in order for Lucy to enjoy an enduring intimacy—beyond mortality—with him" (52), while Levenson makes the case that he remains "always absent and always a lover…recreate[d] perpetually" in the acts of writing and reading (163).[171] In these readings, Paul's "absence" enables an enduring connection that wouldn't otherwise be possible—a connection that stretches beyond life itself. Zigarovich strikes even nearer the point in calling Paul a "Lacanian hyphen signifying the liminal space between presence and absence" (49) and a "disembodied presence" (54). This trope of absence has become central to post-structuralist readings of the novel, and phenomenal silence has unrecognized importance for the conversation. Like Paul at the end of *Villette*, it is a thing on the cusp of absence and presence.

Villette provides an interesting image, early in the novel, for a form of silent connectedness that blurs the distinction between being present and being absent.[172] Although this image appears well before Paul's removal, I take its placement as a consequence of Brontë's foresight—she had determined Paul's fate well in advance—as well as the retrospective nature

---

[171] Lucy Snowe hints at this on p. 538 when she says: "Magnificent-minded, grand-hearted, dear, faulty little man! You deserved candour, and from me always had it." She positions her narration as a direct address—a manner of speaking to him. Kim makes a similar argument in "Corpse Hoarding," claiming that Lucy "pens an immortalized version of Paul confined within the pages of her narrative" and "creates a Paul kept alive within her mind" (8).

[172] Brontë also found herself closest to those she had loved (and lost) amid silence, during her walks out on the nearby moors. Writing from Haworth Parsonage in 1850 after the deaths of her siblings, she tells W. S. Williams, "In the hill-country silence [Emily's and Anne's] poetry comes by lines and stanzas into 'my' mind" (22 May 1850).

of Lucy's narrative. The image comes in a vision that Lucy has about the relationship between Ginevra and Graham while Ginevra is away on holiday travel: "By True Love was Ginevra followed," Lucy avers, "never could she be alone. Was she insensible to this presence?" (175).[173] Graham's love, which follows Ginevra wherever she may travel, constitutes a "presence" and thus renders aloneness impossible. Lucy's conception of the unbreakable connection between these two lovers draws on the concepts of electricity and telegraphy—"I conceived an electric chord of sympathy between them, a fine chain of mutual understanding, sustaining union through a separation of a hundred leagues — carrying, across mound and hollow, communication by prayer and wish" (ibid)—but it also looks beyond these existing capabilities.

This is precisely the form of communication that Lucy would wish for during Paul's temporary—and later more permanent—absence, and it is impressively forward-thinking. While her references to "mutual understanding" and a "chord of sympathy" resemble traditional tropes of sympathetic communion, such as between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, these references appear in a passage the overarching trope of which is scientific and technological. Brontë, in a sense, over-writes the romantic with an emphasis on the *constructed* and technique-intensive nature of silent communication. Only a year later, Cyrus West Field would conceive of a telegraph cable that could span the Atlantic and connect those in far-distant spaces. But Lucy's envisioned technology is more than a telegraph. The electricity of its chord or "fine chain," which enables it to cross uncertain terrain and span oceans, carries ephemeral

[173] It is important to acknowledge the deep irony of this quote, in its positioning as a reference to Graham and Ginevra. As Lucy and the reader well know by this point, the nature of the connection that she describes bears no resemblance to the actual relationship between the two. This "chord of sympathy" and "mutual understanding" is a far more fitting representation of that which Lucy seeks over the course of the novel and gains with Paul.

forms of communication. It brings prayers and wishes, sentiments that are generally unwritten and even unspoken, rather than carrying letters, notes, or overt messages. The chord also "sustain[s] union" continuously, instead of transmitting communication periodically and irregularly.

Communion with those beyond material reach, or beyond the realms of the living, is a phenomenon that Brontë chooses only to allude to within the pages of *Villette*. However such a connection might look, it has much in common with the silent sociality on which Lucy founds her most precious relations. She points to the enriching experience of being together in silence throughout her narrative—most notably in encounters with Polly and Paul. In recalling a quiet evening with Paul at the pensionnat, she tells the reader, "Silence is of different kinds, and breathes different meanings; no words could inspire a pleasanter content than did M. Paul's wordless presence" (385). Under such circumstances, the physical proximity appears to matter less for Lucy than do the feelings of connectedness, love, and attachment that pervade the experience. Paul's status at the end of the novel is a logical extension of this phenomenon of "wordless presence": he is no longer within physical reach, but she experiences his love as a kind of silent presence, facilitating her life in other ways.[174] Importantly, she chooses never to leave the space "M. Paul had chosen"—the place where he is perpetually expected (544).

Comforted by the presence of his love, Lucy lives in the ever-extending moment of his return—as evidenced by her shift to present tense at the close of her narrative: "M. Emanuel's

[174] He is "the spring which moved [her] energies" (544). It is his existence (and later his memory) that inspires her to work hard: "I deemed myself the steward of his property, and determined, God willing, to render a good account" (543), and she finds great professional success in doing so.

return is fixed. It is Autumn; he is to be with me ere the mists of November come" (545). The dwelling space that he designed for her continues to play a primary role in the perpetually present moment of her writing—"My school flourishes, my house is ready: I have made him a little library…I have cultivated out of love for him…the plants he preferred, and some of them are yet in bloom. I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own" (ibid). Silent, absent, or perhaps wordlessly present, Paul is more fully in her grasp now than he was when he stood before her. The specter of his loss does appear in the form of a shrieking storm—roaring as the other storms in her life have roared—but stillness, "hush" and a "pause" conclude this chapter of her life (546). Paul is not dead, full stop. He remains present in a different form, held near to her by the signifying space of their home and frozen in time by the shared and liminal space of a pause.

In her chapter in *Time, Space, and Place in Charlotte Brontë*, Julie Donovan argues that "science and technology wrapped themselves around the pen" for novelists such as Brontë (14). She describes Brontë's particular approach to technology as "interested but, at times, restrained," and claims that the novelist "retreat[ed] from the frenetic activity of increasing industrialization and faster modes of communication" (23). *Villette*'s intense focus on closely-knit relations and investment in the insulated spaces vital to this form of sociality reflect the larger Victorian concern that railway networks and other such systems would "erode local communities and strain intimate relationships" by changing the patterns of social engagement (Byerly 143).

It would take later writers such as George Eliot, however, to bring the aural anxiety evident in Brontë's work to its more extreme and diffuse late-century conclusions. In novels such

as *Middlemarch*, Eliot tracks the creeping of these sonic concerns out of the urban environment and into provincial life—confronting the threat of industrial noise and the shifting import of silence in the English countryside. Anticipating late-century conversations about attention, her fiction highlights the grim implications of Britain's proliferating noise levels for social cohesion.

Chapter Three
Silence and the Ethics of Attention in George Eliot's Fiction

"There is a constant interaction between the self and the milieu of external reality in which the self is placed, and our life consists of the interaction."
— Wilhelm Dilthey, "Imagination of the Poet" (1887)

1 Attention as an Ethical Dilemma

In her 1856 review, "The Natural History of German Life," George Eliot highlighted the social consciousness that literature, over other genres of writing, is capable of generating:

> Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. (*The Essays* 145)

What great literature produces—almost reflexively, according to Eliot—is a certain kind of attention. Distinguished by its outward focus (on that which is "apart from" the self), this vital form of attention is the basis of moral sentiment. But as Eliot and other mid-century writers were well aware, attention was a capacity increasingly under siege in the industrialized and urbanizing nations of Western Europe.

As early as 1817, Hegel wrote of the limited nature of human attentiveness. "It does not follow," he warned, "that attention is an easy matter…since a man, if he wants to apprehend one particular object, must make abstraction from everything else" (*Philosophy* 195). Arthur Schopenhauer made a similar assertion, decades later, that "we…can become conscious of only one [thing] at a time, indeed even of this one only under the condition that for the time we forget everything else" (137). Of greater concern by the 1840s, however, was the impact of proliferating external stimuli on man's ability to attend—distracting the mind and reducing an already restricted capacity even further. While the limits of consciousness and, more specifically,

attention, had long been noted, experimental physiologists would prove by the end of the 1850s that there were also physical "thresholds" beyond which mankind simply could not perceive.[175]

In *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (2001), Jonathan Crary delineates a growing "realization" over the second half of the nineteenth century, "that attention had limits beyond and below which productivity and social cohesion were threatened" (4). Crary calls attention "a decisively new kind of problem in the nineteenth century" (5), as the "emergence of a social, urban, psychic, and industrial field increasingly saturated with sensory input" pushed human perceptive powers to their natural limits (13). Matthew Arnold stressed this phenomenon in much of his poetry, citing, in "The Buried Life" (1852), "[the] demand / of all the thousand nothings of the hour / Their stupefying power" (6.24-26), and lamenting in some of his most famous lines, "this strange disease of modern life, / With its sick hurry, its divided aims, / Its heads o'ertax'd" ("The Scholar Gypsy," 21.3-5). His reference in "Thrysis" (1866) to the "great town's harsh, heart-wearying roar" (24.4) forms a somber counterpart to the disorienting roars of sound that punctuate urban scenes in the Victorian novel.

One of the greatest threats to the vital human capacity to attend, as framed by writers such as Eliot and Arnold, was *noise*. Eliot complained that urban noise "break[s] up the day and scatter[s] one's nervous energy," and her letters build a telling contrast between the headaches and interruptions of her London life and the "delicious quiet" of the countryside, which promised "fewer interruptions to work" and provided the "bodily ease and mental clearness" that she and

[175] As Schopenhauer notes, "Sometimes external impression of every sense throng in on [the intellect], disturbing and interrupting it " (138). Gustav Fechner coined both a unit of measurement for perceiving external stimulation—the "just noticeable difference"—and the notion of a stimulus "threshold." See his *Elements of Psychophysics* (1860).

partner George Henry Lewes desperately sought.[176] But Eliot's letters also reveal an uneasy tension between this impulse to withdraw—for the good of her mind and her intellectual productivity—and a conviction that understanding and promoting the common good required a heightened level of attention to one's fellow creatures. If one remained sequestered, as *Middlemarch* character Dorothea Casaubon finds herself after marriage, then "the sense of connection with a manifold pregnant existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision" (*Middlemarch* 274).

Eliot was an early interlocutor in the nineteenth century's growing conversation about attention, and what she confronted long before late-century writers such as John Dewey, William James, and Emile Durkheim was the immense ethical dilemma inherent in the act of attending. In order to attend to a fellow creature at the level of consciousness that engenders moral sentiment and fosters social cohesion, you must filter out a wealth of competing objects. To enhance discernment, you must narrow the scope. She recognized, as Arnold propounded in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1865) and other works, that a limited capacity to attend necessitated careful direction to the most fruitful objects,[177] but her fiction wrestles with the implication that in order to hear and absorb much of what is good, you simply close your ears to the remainder.

---

[176] Quoted from a 22 May 1857 letter to Sara Hennell—"I hope to get up my strength in this delicious quiet, and have fewer interruptions to work from headache"—and a letter to Madame Bodichon from 4 June 1872: "I am in a corresponding state of relief from the noises and small excitements that break up the day and scatter one's nervous energy in London…getting more ease and mental clearness than I have had for the last six months."

[177] Advocating for an embrace of the "Indian virtue of detachment," Arnold insists, "The rush and roar of practical life will always have a dizzying and attracting effect upon the most collected spectator, and tend to draw him into its vortex; most of all will this be the case where that life is so powerful as it is in England. But it is only by remaining collected, and refusing to lend himself to the point of view of the practical man, that the critic can do the practical man any service" (n.p.).

Concerned with living beings and the sympathetic impulses that unite them—rather than disembodied ideas and the creative powers that produce them—Eliot engaged far more seriously than contemporaries such as Arnold with what it meant to reduce a field of observation that was largely comprised of fellow creatures. Her articulation in *Middlemarch* of a "roar on the other side of silence" that contains all the psychic, emotional, and sonic material that humans can neither hear nor tolerate brought questions of human physiology (i.e. attention, perception, and the thresholds for each) into conversation with social and narrative responsibility. Under Eliot's conception, individuals must attend carefully to their fellows in order to achieve the relatedness and moral insight that will shape them into compassionate and discerning members of society. But because human attention is inherently restricted, most fall short of this ideal—especially those bombarded by the "thousand nothings" of a chaotic modern life. It thus becomes the responsibility of the individual, and the narrator, to foster attention by whatever means possible.

The solution that Eliot fashioned over the course of her fiction was a moderated deployment of silence. From *The Lifted Veil* to *Romola* and *Middlemarch*, silence acts (much as her famous "roar" quote implies) as both a metaphorical and literal filter for the superabundant stimuli that mankind confronts. Silence is a condition that characters such as Piero di Cosimo and Romola must generate for themselves to cut through the din and obtain discernment and moral insight. Sound attenuation is also the means by which *Middlemarch*'s narrator performs both a diegetic and metatextual paring back of the soundscape—eschewing sonic detail and situating intimate encounters in muted diegetic spaces in order to enhance the outward attention of readers and characters, respectively. Ultimately, Eliot's fiction manifests her ambivalence about

silence—like withdrawal, sensory and social insulation carry the high risk of indifference—but it also reveals her conclusion that the social benefits of close attention outweigh the heavy cost of exclusion.

Eliot scholarship has been adept at tracing out the many connections between her fiction and the major philosophical, religious, and scientific currents of her time. Recent work from scholars such as Rebecca Jane Hildebrand, Meegan Kennedy, Sean O'Toole, and Richard Menke continues to map Eliot's engagement with nineteenth-century physiology and trace the influence of thinkers such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and her partner, George Henry Lewes, in her novels. *Middlemarch*, in particular, has become defined in scholarship by its adoption and repurposing of organic structures and concepts.[178] Recent aural studies of Eliot's work center on concepts such as aural sensibility and sympathetic resonance, drawing on nineteenth-century investigations of sensation to argue for the primacy of aurality in Eliot's ethics of sympathy.[179]

This chapter illuminates new connections between Eliot and Victorian science by highlighting an overlooked resonance between Eliot's fiction and mounting recognition of attention as the predominant mental faculty, indispensable not only to survival but to the operation of social consciousness and the attainment of moral insight. I posit *attention* as the missing link between Eliot's interests in human physiology and environmental influence and her promotion of aural sensibility and—to borrow John Picker's term—"close listening."

---

[178] See, for example, work by Sally Shuttleworth, Gillian Beer, and Rick Rylance.

[179] In "Between Deafness and Sound: Aurality and the Limits of Sympathy in Mill on the Floss" (2011), Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi argues, "empirical studies of the relationship of sensation and thought created a climate in which 'sound began to assume the status as ideal function that sight had earlier held'…For Eliot the ear is the most deeply receptive organ and sound is bound to the ego." (78, 81). For more on "aural sensibility," see Kay Young's "*Middlemarch* and the Problem of Other Minds Heard" (2003) and Peter Capuano's "An Objective Aural Relative in *Middlemarch*" (2007).

This chapter reads *The Lifted Veil*, *Romola*, and *Middlemarch* as stages in Eliot's artistic endeavor to identify the degree of immersion (in external stimuli) at which human beings experience their greatest capacity for attention. In each novel, aural onslaught represents a larger concern about an overstimulation or overtaxation of the mind that confounds, paralyzes, and alienates. In *The Lifted Veil*, protagonist Latimer emblematizes the limited human capacity to attend. His isolationism in response to a "superadded consciousness"—i.e., a telepathy that he metaphorizes as a supranatural sense of hearing—draws a link between cognitive overload (and, to extend Eliot's metaphor, sensory overload) and a failure in social consciousness.

Urban tumult replaces telepathic "hearing" in *Romola* to drive home a depiction of noise as antagonistic not only to human contemplation and discernment, but also to social cohesion. Eliot foregrounds the ethical importance of man's ability to *distinguish*—to identify one voice or source of need, for example—and the threat to attention that indistinguishable masses of urban noise present. Less studied than Eliot's other novels, *Romola* holds the key to understanding the ethical status of silence in her works. Characters Piero di Cosimo and Romola deploy silence in the pursuit of mental clarity and right judgment—qualities with important social implications in the novel—but it is an entity that threatens perpetually to tip the balance in favor of egotism.

While *Romola* demonstrates the social yield of narrowed attention at the level of individual characters, *Middlemarch* undertakes a far more global fostering of attention. Sound attenuation unfolds on both the narrative and diegetic planes as Eliot's narrator constructs a sonic environment conducive to ethical social engagement. Taking the concept of an attention threshold in hand, she carefully curates what will fall within and outside the narrow range of fullest attention—or, as we might say, on the other side of silence. Dorothea Casaubon, limited

in the range of her attention by social circumstance, comes to stand, in all of Eliot's canon, as the exemplar for that attentiveness to one's fellow beings which is the germ of moral sentiment.

2 The Agony of the Roar in *The Lifted Veil* (1859)

Eliot's 1859 novella, *The Lifted Veil*, contains an early iteration of her Middlemarchean conception of the "roar on the other side of silence"[180] that is telling in the slippage it invites between *knowing* (having greater access to information about others) and hearing—an elision that Eliot upholds throughout the novella. Latimer, burdened throughout his narrative with what he terms a "superadded consciousness of the actual," likens this phenomenon of enhanced consciousness to "a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing," which "mak[es] audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness" (18). With this "involuntary intrusion into other souls," Latimer is cursed always to hear *more*, even in ostensible silence (ibid).

Even before the arrival of a superadded consciousness that Eliot grounds in sonic terms, Latimer's tendency to identify those in his surroundings as sounds gives his decisions to listen (or not) the full moral significance of deciding whether to acknowledge a fellow being. Eliot links Latimer's perceptiveness to his overactive ears in the opening pages of the novella, when he describes his childhood sensitivity as a predominantly aural experience:

> …for I was certainly a very sensitive child. I remember still the mingled trepidation and delicious excitement with which I was affected by the tramping of the horses on the pavement in the echoing stables, by the loud resonance of the grooms' voices, by the booming bark of the dogs as my father's carriage thundered under the archway of the courtyard, by the din of the gong as it gave notice of luncheon and dinner. The measured tramp of soldiery which I sometimes heard…made me sob and tremble; and yet when they were gone past, I longed for them to come back again. (5)

[180] The later version of this quote appears on page 194 of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871).

To Latimer's mind, a living thing *is* the noise it produces. The horses are one and the same with their tramp, the dogs their barking, and the soldiers their measured march.

The "abnormal sensibility" of Latimer's later years brings an additional mass of stimuli within earshot, as it were, and tests the limits of his willingness to attend—a circumstance to which Latimer responds by denigrating and even dehumanizing the minds that exert this confounding pressure. He figures the thoughts and sentiments of his companions as agitating sounds, explaining, "[the] ideas and emotions of some uninteresting acquaintance…would force themselves on my consciousness like an importunate, ill-played musical instrument, or the loud activity of an imprisoned insect" (13). One German courier's thoughts are like "a ringing in the ears not to be got rid of" (18). Latimer's sudden cognizance of the internal activities of those around him is analogous to an increase in sonic input. His companions' internal noise compounds already extant external noise, and instead of producing any of the "delicious excitement" (5) with which he trembled in former years, this sonic profusion excites fatigue and antipathy.

Given Eliot's concerns about the constraints of human attention and the fact that many things—including persons—must go *un*attended, Latimer's "gift" represents an avenue of inquiry into how far human awareness can be stretched as well as the consequences of its boundedness. He is a test case for the human response to (and incapacity for) omniscience. Hearing "stream[s] of thought" where others "find perfect stillness" (18), Latimer illustrates what it might be like to

have "powers beyond"[181] one's fellow beings—perpetually hearing, and thus knowing, more of humankind. Eliot's conclusions about such a scenario are grim. In the end, Latimer's preternatural quality provides an avenue through which she can express grave skepticism about the human ability to process greater levels of stimuli and, even more importantly, about the tenuous correlation between knowing more about one's fellow creatures and caring more about their wellbeing.

Latimer's portrayal of his heightened awareness as a burden reveals an unfitness for this "unhappy gift of insight" (15). Characterizing it variously as "diseased consciousness" (14) and a "diseased participation in other people's consciousness" (17), his use of the modifier "diseased" is significant for the collapse it invites between enhanced perception and mental disorder. Perpetually tormented, he bears "the stamp of a morbid organization, framed for passive suffering" (14). While it is important to acknowledge Latimer's flaws as a character and question him as narrator of his own hardships, Eliot substantiates the unworkability of his position with more than his own complaints. His progressive deterioration from mental distress, to passivity, paralysis, and complete social alienation crystalizes a larger failing in the human capacity to attend broadly and outlines its implications for ethical social engagement. As is inevitably the case in Eliot's narratives, external circumstance and the societal frameworks at play bear greater responsibility for any moral failings than individuals caught within the system.

Eliot's postulation in *The Lifted Veil* is twofold: one, that external input easily outstrips man's ability (and willingness) to attend—a point I will examine further in the next section—and

[181] This quote refers to the epigraph added by Eliot in 1873: "Give me no light, great Heaven, but such as turns / To energy of human fellowship; / No powers beyond the growing heritage / That makes completer manhood" (3).

two, that unfiltered access to the contents of other minds produces aversion as readily as attraction (a narrative challenge to which she returned in *Middlemarch*).

Eliot's conception of a figure who faces "a roar of sound" where others perceive "perfect stillness" bears a striking resemblance to the contemporaneous work of psychophysicists such as Gustav Fechner. Their alignment reflects a pervading interest in the relationship between living creatures and environmental stimuli during the second half of the nineteenth century. From 1850 to 1860, Fechner completed a series of experiments designed to quantify the human experience of physical stimuli. His resulting publication—*Elemente der Pyschophysik* (1860)—laid the groundwork for a model of attention on which he would continue to build. Fechner, like Eliot, predicted an inevitable deterioration in any being burdened with a greater than usual capacity for perceiving. He warned,

> If even the slightest stimulus were effective, we would have to feel an infinite mixture and unending variety of mild sensations of every kind at all times, since minimal stimuli of all types constantly surround us. Such is not the case. The fact that each stimulus must first reach a certain limit before it arouses a sensation assures to mankind a state undisturbed to a certain degree by external stimulation… (*Elements* 208)[182]

For Fechner, humans' limited sensitivity was a protective mechanism that warded off excessive perturbation and ensured a more cohesive perception of the external world.

Under Eliot's conception, however, the "roar" that exists just beyond the limits of human awareness contains far more than inanimate and unspecified sonic matter, and the inability or unwillingness to hear it has moral implications. The roar that Latimer hears—a precursor to the

[182] Fechner also claims that "a uniform state of perception is assured because stimulus differences cannot be noticed below their threshold" (208).

Middlemarchean roar that Eliot claims human beings "should die of" confronting (194)—is laden with emotional and psychic material. His antipathy toward it represents Eliot's prediction of how human beings would respond under the pressure of this increased physical, emotional, and psychical stimulation.

Eliot engaged with concerns that extended well beyond the threat of physical and emotional perturbation highlighted by Fechner. Her investigation of human attention and perception brought physical reactivity into conversation with social responsibility, as Latimer's degeneration to a state of complete anti-sociality under these conditions reveals. In order to avoid the "sounds" that plague him, Latimer repulses the minds that produce them—often when they are most in need of guidance or communion. His trajectory from sensitive child to rootless recluse implies that this form of overtaxation produces far more than physical or mental discomfort: it undermines the bonds that connect one social creature to another.

What is ultimately at stake in Latimer's exposure to other minds is the deterioration of the sympathetic impulse. The initial symptoms that he experiences resemble the kind of mental disturbance that Fechner portended, deepening the novella's association of preternatural perception with discomposure, but these opening complaints lay the groundwork for complete social withdrawal. Latimer's awareness of the contents of nearby minds is "wearying and annoying" when the process involves tedious acquaintances, but it amounts to an "intense pain and grief when it seemed to be opening…the souls of those who were in close relation to [him]" (14). This knowledge of others reveals such a "struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts" that Latimer comes to view "human words and deeds" as "leaflets covering a fermenting heap" (ibid). This disillusionment with

humanity explains his early observation, "I have never been encouraged to trust much in the sympathy of my fellow-men…it is the living only who cannot be forgiven—the living only from whom men's indulgence and reverence are held off" (4).

Instead of exciting his solicitude for the needs and desires of others, Latimer's "superadded consciousness" renders him passive to the point of rigid apathy. This state of existence, as Eliot recognized, would be catastrophic for social cohesion if it spread beyond a single, overburdened individual. Insight regarding other minds sparks Latimer's sympathy only once over the course of the narrative, at a moment when he witnesses the true depth of his father's grief.[183] This exception provides a glimmer of what Eliot might have hoped increased consciousness of others would entail, as Latimer stands by his father "in sad silence" and notes "the presence of a new element that blended us as we had never been blent before" (27). Beyond this outlier, however, the "loud activity" (13) of human minds drives Latimer further and further out of concert with society.

The overtaxed mind loses all potential for the kind of outward attention that Eliot finds imperative for communitarian sentiment.[184] In his struggle against the unasked-for "obtrusion" (13) of other minds, Latimer comes to fetishize circumscription and champion ignorance—

[183] The encounter between Latimer and his father after the death of his older brother represents a special exception to Latimer's increasing alienation from others over the course of the narrative. Latimer recounts, "I had shunned my father more than any one…for the radical antipathy between our natures made my insight into his inner self a constant affliction to me…But now, at last, a sorrow had come…As I saw into the desolation of my father's heart, I felt a movement of deep pity towards him, which was the beginning of a new affection" (27-8). Latimer classifies this as "the first deep compassion I had ever felt" (28).

[184] While I do not examine communitarian sentiment at length in this chapter, it's important to note Eliot's complex relationship with the concept. An unreachable ideal in the end, communitarianism forces painful tradeoffs and produces a ripple of consequence in her narratives. For more on communitarianism's dark undertones in Eliot's work, see Christopher Lane's "George Eliot and Enmity" in *Hatred & Civility: The Antisocial Life in Victorian England*.

inverting the moral imperatives to seek understanding and care for one's fellow creatures. Comparing his own existence and "tortures of sensitiveness" (24) to that of his "coarse," "narrow," and contented older brother, Latimer insists that "ready dullness, healthy selfishness, [and] good-tempered conceit" are the "keys to happiness" (25). The personal qualities that he highlights—dullness, selfishness, and conceit—are significant for what they exclude: knowledge or perception, care and concern for others, awareness beyond the self. The narrowness of his brother's nature—namely, the wealth of material that he can*not* hear—becomes a personal benefit. Ignorance functions as a protective barrier, insulating the individual ego in a manner that Latimer envies greatly.

While Latimer's pull toward egocentrism and his envy of "narrow" lots may be inevitable under Eliot's conception of human relations, she positions his clairvoyance as the direct source of this perverted uninterest in others and the impetus for his growing antisociality. "My exasperating insight into Alfred's self-complacent soul," he explains, "seemed to absolve me from all bonds toward him. This man needed no pity, no love" (25). Even with Bertha, the "repulsion from [one] [an]other" reaches its climax only after he gains access to the contents of her mind (33). Ultimately, Latimer shuns all human company, avoiding any emotional bond with those in his immediate surroundings. Already "entirely passive" about his own lot (ibid), he grows apathetic to the circumstances of others, too, "as if the relation between [him] and [his] fellow-men was more and more deadened" (36). Through the self-medication of social isolation, he becomes, ironically, "rather duller than the rest of the world" (37), "living continually in his own solitary future" (36).

Latimer's experience represents only a fraction of the immense pressure that a truly supranatural consciousness of the living world would exert on a human being, suggesting that on a grander scale (in terms of the level of consciousness or number of individuals affected) the repercussions would be even more dire.[185] Greater knowledge of others is not the simple answer to the problem of egocentrism that Eliot faces. Much as an undifferentiated mass of noise overwhelms the ear, increased and unfiltered knowledge of our fellow beings overburdens human sympathy. Latimer illustrates this in both word and action. He scorns the supposition at the heart of Eliot's experimental novella "that it was only the narrowness of our knowledge which hemmed in our generosity, our awe, our human piety, and hindered them from submerging our hard indifference to the sensations and emotions of our fellows" (21-2), and bears out the falseness of this sentiment in his pointed disengagement.

The Lifted Veil sets forth Eliot's assertion that human consciousness *requires* limitations, however problematic those acts of limiting may be. In an aside that sounds far more like Eliot than Latimer, she insists on "our soul's [absolute] need of something hidden and uncertain for the maintenance of that doubt and hope and effort which are the breath of its life" (29). For her, the answer to greater social cohesion lay in the careful balancing of known with unknown, of egoism with a more concentrated awareness of others.[186] Her fiction evinces this continual weighing of the protection of the individual mind against the moral imperative to *know* about and attend to others.

---

[185] He faces only the internal dialogue of persons in close proximity to him—not hearing details as fine as the squirrel's heartbeat or the growing grass, as Eliot would phrase it *Middlemarch*—but even that small taste produces a rapid and irreversible deterioration.

[186] By "concentrated," I mean increased in terms of intensity, but necessarily limited in its scope.

3 Silence and the Limits of Attention

As Eliot grappled with the social implications of human inattention in *The Lifted Veil*, silence arose for the first of many times as an ethically vexed solution to the problem of distracted or divided attention. Among Latimer's shortcomings as a character is an especially restricted capacity for attention—an attribute that Eliot sketches out over several key scenes in the novella. His incapacity for broad or sustained attention allows Eliot to accentuate the limits of human attentiveness and grapple with the conditions for enhancing or supporting human contemplation—one of which, as this dissertation examines, is an attenuated soundscape.

Eliot wrestles, first through figures such as Latimer and Romola, and later at a metatextual level, with the consequences of limited mental bandwidth when the objects of interest are fellow human beings. In *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), Schopenhauer compared the boundedness of human attention with which Eliot contended to a "magic lantern, in the focus of which only one picture can appear at a time; and every picture…must nevertheless soon vanish to make way for the most different and even most vulgar thing" (138). A similar metaphor appears in *The Lifted Veil*, when Latimer describes his first preternatural vision as a "gradual breaking-in" on his consciousness, "like the new images in a dissolving view" (10).[187] This reference to a "dissolving view" method of projection analogizes Latimer's mind to a screen on which successive images must appear in single file. At this moment of insight, the

[187] Helen Small, editor for the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Lifted Veil* (1999), defines the "dissolving view" as "pictures thrown on to a screen from two magic lanterns, angled so that their images overlap on a screen. By means of a pair of thin metallic shutters terminating in comb-like teeth, the picture from one could be gradually cut off at the same time as the other emerged, so that one picture appeared to melt into the next" (91-2 FN 10).

vision predominates. His mind can process nothing else. "To grasp one thing," as Schopenhauer observes, "it must give up another" (137-8).

In line with philosophers such as Hegel and Schopenhauer, Eliot depicts the act of attending in *The Lifted Veil* as a process of filtering or blocking out competing stimuli in order to focus more acutely on the desired object of attention.[188] But this undertaking, as all three thinkers acknowledged, has its basis in exclusion. Crary explains that "attention, as a shutting out, a powerful filter, could also be seen [in the later nineteenth century] as a model of Nietzschean forgetting" (41). Silence, in serving as a protective buffer for Latimer on rare and coveted occasions, leads to the same moral impasse—the question of what, in performing this filtering function, it is blocking out or rendering effectively nonexistent. It offers crucial pockets of relief in Latimer's sonically and cognitively overwhelmed existence, but Eliot's novella also foregrounds the ethical dilemma inseparable from any method of discriminating and excluding. Silence retains this aura of ambivalence throughout Eliot's canon, as it insulates and nurtures the individual self—and the attentive mind—while threatening to diminish awareness of fellow creatures and societal needs.

Eliot addresses another aspect of Latimer's attentive faculty when he recounts a visit to the Picture Gallery at Prince Liechtenstein's palace: it operates with an intensity that precludes any sustained use. He tells the reader, "I could never look at many pictures in succession; for pictures, when they are at all powerful, affect me so strongly that one or two exhaust all my

[188] The scene of Charles Meunier's experiment is a very useful benchmark for Eliot's conception of absorbed (and highly productive) attention—"I forgot everything but Meunier and the experiment in which he was so absorbed, that I think his senses would have been closed against all sounds or sights which had no relation to it" (41).

capability of contemplation" (18). After a long and stirring contemplation of Lorenzo Lotto's "A Lady with a Drawing of Lucretia," Latimer refuses to turn his attention—or even his eyes—on any other paintings for the remainder of the day. His finite powers of concentration must replenish themselves before he will again open himself to surrounding objects of any significance. These flashes of intensive focus represent both a strength and a fatal flaw in his capacity for attention. Eliot anticipates thinkers such as Alfred Fouillée in her suspicion that attention tends inevitably toward its own collapse. Fouillée links concentrated attention to exhaustion and paralyzed willpower—a prediction that Latimer bears out entirely, more than thirty years earlier.[189]

While this modus operandi has less moral import when the objects in question are paintings, the upshot of this aesthetic practice is that Latimer adopts a similar policy in relation to persons. His willingness to attend to their quasi-sonic mental output is equally circumscribed and easily exhausted. He tires of knowing the "trivial experience[s] of indifferent people" (13) and begins to narrow his social circle, shunning those with antipathetic natures—such as his father and brother—and pursuing the companionship of Bertha, the one being whose "inward self remained shrouded" (31). Meanwhile, he finds himself unable to attend to anything beyond the "self-consciousness" that is frozen, as it were, on the dissolving view of his mind (13). Books—those emblems of extrapersonal interest—have "no power of chaining [his] attention," because his "own emotions [took] the form of a drama which urge[d] itself imperatively on [his] contemplation" (24). Constantly bombarded with the competing interests of other minds, his imperiled egoism responds with a paroxysm of self-pity that eclipses all other concerns.

[189] Cited in Crary 47: Alfred Fouillée, "Le physique et le mental: A propos de l'hypnotisme," Revue des Deux Mondes 105 (May 1, 1891), p. 438. (Translated edition not available.)

Silence, as a remedy for worn nerves, becomes a counterpoint in the novella to mental agitation, but it is an antidote that operates at the cost of disconnection from others: occasional lapses in Latimer's "unpleasant sensibility" offer him an escape from others' mental output (13). Deepening the elision between consciousness and hearing, he likens these "moments of rest, when the souls of my companions were once more shut out from me" to "a relief such as silence brings to wearied nerves" (ibid). Eliot treats environmental quiet in a similar manner in a letter written in 1872, after one of her many escapes to the countryside. She tells Madame Bodichon,

> I am in a corresponding state of relief from the noises and small excitements that break up the day and scatter one's nervous energy in London. We have been in our hiding-place about twelve days now, and I am enjoying it more and more—getting more bodily ease and mental clearness than I have had for the last six months. (4 June 1872)

In designating her current location a "hiding-place," Eliot betrays something that her "state of relief" has in common with Latimer's "moments of rest": her removal from the "noises and small excitements" that dampen her productivity and weaken her health in London entails a withdrawal from the persons and engagements that *produce* those noises and interruptions.

In a narrative where "the horror that belongs to…a human being whose nature is not adjusted to simple human conditions" is akin to an unnaturally acute sense of hearing (12), silence becomes synonymous with relief from both wearying sounds and overwhelming consciousness. Yet Eliot remained troubled by the conviction that seeking such relief was nearly indistinguishable from drinking a draught of oblivion. In *Romola* and then *Middlemarch*, she would conduct renewed experiments on the most fruitful application of human attention and the ethical deployment of silence in support of those ends.

4 "Deaf Isolation" and the Problem of Noise in *Romola* (1862)

A few years after the publication of *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot again took up questions of aurality, attention, and the significance of sensory overload for social cohesion—this time for merely mortal characters, and in an urban setting where daily noise forms a cacophony akin to the cognitive burden that drove Latimer to distraction. While *The Lifted Veil* highlighted the boundaries of human attention and set forth the socially antagonistic repercussions of a suprahuman consciousness, in *Romola* Eliot argues that the overwhelming stimulation of urban life is similarly antagonistic to the human mind—disrupting the attention and thereby interfering with social consciousness at a societal level.

Romola's sonic overload, with sound literally chasing human figures around street corners,[190] was vital to Eliot's ongoing development of an ethics of attention that balanced the insulation of the individual mind with a strategically heightened and focused awareness of others. In an 1863 letter to R. H. Hutton, Eliot wrote of an intention (and intentionality) behind *Romola*'s abundant detail that she feared would be lost on even a careful reader:

> Perhaps even a judge so discerning as yourself could not infer from the imperfect result how strict a self-control and selection were exercised in the presentation of details. I believe there is scarcely a phrase, an incident, an allusion, that did not gather its value to me from its supposed subservience to my main artistic objectives…It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. (8 August 1863)

Renaissance Florence—that "medium in which [her] character[s] move"—is as significant in its attributes as the titular Romola or Tito Melema. As Hildebrand suggests in "*Middlemarch's*

[190] One example is Tito's flight from an angry mob just before his death, when he continually changes course to avoid the sounds of the mob (and, of course, the mob those sounds represent) that reach his ears (513-14).

Medium: Description, Sympathy, and Realism's Ambient Worlds," Eliot's commitment to the careful depiction of a narrative's setting (or "medium") reflected her engagement with scientists like Comte and Spencer, who "relied on the idea of organism-environment interaction as the foundation of biological life, and, by extension, of social and psychological life as well" (1002).

Much like the city-dwelling Victorians of Eliot's own period, *Romola*'s characters must learn to navigate and modulate Florence's wealth of sensory input in order to attend to—and aid—their fellow beings. In a letter written during the novel's serial publication, Eliot referred to "town sensations" as a distinct category of perceptions with which human beings must cope in urbanized environs.[191] For the diegetic sensory experience in *Romola*, sonic stimuli predominate over the rest—a feature that is unique to this work among her canon. With captivating public orators, a particular liability to blindness among Florentines (embodied and articulated by the blind scholar, Bardo di Bardi),[192] and references to the soundscape in almost every city scene, the world these characters navigate is a heavily aural one. Jacques Attali's insistence that "more than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangement that fashion societies" (6) finds expression in Eliot's painstaking historical narrative, which homes in continually on the relations between a social body and the ambient noise of its environment.

With no preternatural figures to account for, the ruckus that dominates *Romola*'s soundscape is all externally produced—it doesn't contain mental material, as in *The Lifted Veil*. Even so, Eliot's descriptions of urban noise illuminate a continuing collapse between human

[191] In a letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot writes, "We made a rush to Dorking for a day or two, and the quiet and fresh air seemed to make a new creature of me; but when we get back to town, town sensations return" (2 February 1863).
[192] Bardo tells Tito, "I am…totally blind: a calamity to which we Florentines are held especially liable" (58). Cennini also references an ancient "proverb": "Pisans false, Florentines blind" (85).

output and inanimate sound that is no less troubling. As both works imply, attenuating a soundscape necessarily means stifling human voices. Eliot reifies this collapse between city noise and human utterance in the figure of Bratti Ferravecchi, Florentine shop owner and scrap dealer. According to *Romola*'s narrator, the "deep guttural sounds" and "loud, harsh tones" of Bratti's voice—sounds which are "scarcely intelligible" to his companion, Tito—are "not unlike the creaking and grating of a cart-wheel" (12-13). While Bratti's unintelligibility to Tito has class undertones, the resemblance that his voice bears to a cart-wheel is a clear indication that, when it comes to sound, the human and the nonhuman are not easily separated.

The sheer volume and variety of noise within *Romola*'s soundscape help elucidate one of Eliot's fundamental concerns about human sensory perception: excessive levels of input—whether sonic or otherwise—cripple the human power to *distinguish* one thing from the next. The failure of this capacity is even more problematic when the masses of stimuli that comprise *Romola*'s "roar[s]" (14), "clash[es]" (11), and "storm[s] of sound" (89) contain a blur of human and unhuman tones. For Eliot, the ability to distinguish is indispensable not only in forming judgments—and thereby calibrating one's moral compass—but also in recognizing and relating to fellow beings. She crystalizes this problem, for example, in the mob of persons that pursues Tito. He can identify them only by their collective sounds (sounds without faces), which devolve over time into a mix of "trampling and…confused voices" (514). The homogeneity that humans perceive when it becomes impossible to differentiate one entity from another runs counter to Eliot's artistic project: elucidating and exciting sympathy for the experiences of particularized fellow beings.

Mixed and competing sounds can be problematic even at slightly lower decibels, because they interfere with one another's reception by the human ear. The greatest menace to a mind's discriminating powers, however, comes from the overbearing operation of the kinds of loud mechanical noises exemplified by Florence's city bells. Painter Piero di Cosimo, notable in the novel for his especially discerning mind,[193] is the first character to connect his hatred of the bells with a distaste for overlapping noises. Before stuffing his ears with tow, he complains to his companions, "thy chatter and the bells together are more than I can endure" (41). The "chatter" Piero blocks out is the barber Nello's baseless praise of Tito, but while Piero finds each sound irritating in its own right, it is their simultaneity that outstrips his endurance.

Eliot does not designate various categories or types of sound as inherently good or bad in her fiction; rather, as *Romola* makes clear, the trouble arises when any collection of sounds reaches a level at which individual sources are unidentifiable or unintelligible. These are the points at which a body of stimuli outpaces the human ability to distinguish. While Piero di Cosimo expresses annoyance at the bells and counteracts their influence with earplugs, they exert a more insidious force on other characters—a dynamic that betrays Eliot's association of sonic pressure with subjugation in the novel. While literary scholarship has tended to connect *silence* with suppression and thus domination,[194] R. Murray Schafer argues in *The Tuning of the*

[193] In his first encounter with Tito, Piero di Cosimo pegs him for a traitor—long before the reader is aware of his misdeeds and before others have been committed. He is also the first to associate Baldassarre with Tito (both in mind and through the concrete form of his painting), despite Tito's denial of any relation.

[194] See, for example, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the* Attic. Ivan Kreilkamp pushes back against this longstanding association of silence with suppression in *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*.

World that the "association of noise and power has never really been broken in the human imagination. It descends from God, to the priest, to the industrialist" (76).[195]

In *Romola*, inordinate levels of sound—those levels that bombard and exhaust human sensory capacities—again prove antagonistic to social connectedness, because they impel characters to withdraw from the external world of which their fellow beings are part and parcel. For characters such as Romola and Baldassarre, the oppressive bells throw their alienation and separation from the surrounding society into relief.[196] Shortly before Romola's flight from the city, she envisions the tolling bells as a growing firestorm in the city and flees the loggia as though from personal assault:

> …suddenly the great bell in the palace tower rang out a mighty peal: not the hammer-sound of alarm, but an agitated peal of triumph; and one after another every other bell in every other tower seemed to catch the vibration and join the chorus. And as the chorus swelled and swelled till the air seemed made of sound, little flames, vibrating too, as if the sound had caught fire, burst out between the turrets of the palace and on the girdling towers.
>
> That sudden clang, that leaping light, fell on Romola like sharp wounds…she stood aloof from that common life—that Florence which was flinging out its loud exultation to stun the ears of sorrow and loneliness. (301)

Sound swells uncontrollably in Romola's conception, replacing the very air until it seems to threaten all living things in its path. She experiences this sensory onslaught as an almost physical pain that only intensifies her loneliness, and responds by simultaneously covering her ears and retreating to solitude.

---

[195] Schafer points to church bells and the steam engine as two key examples of noise as an expression of power. Eliot's recurring attention to the impact of these bells mirrors criticism from writers such as Dickens about the "prodigious noise" of nineteenth-century machinery (referenced in Schafer, 75).

[196] Later in the novel, Baldassarre has a similarly negative and alienating reaction to the pealing bells. For him, "the bells that swung out louder and louder peals of joy, laying hold of him and making him vibrate along with all the air, seemed to him simply part of that strong world which was against him" (365).

While the bells instantiate the toll that noise can take on an individual's sense of inclusion and connection, Eliot suggests that the stupefying clamor of an urban environment causes an even more widespread impairment of social cohesion. She points to this byproduct of sensory overload in a key phrase that surfaces only once in the novel: "deaf isolation" (89). In the scene where it appears, Tito, Nello, and other Florentine associates converse while they watch the San Giovanni parade from an upper window. Tito is cut off mid-sentence, however, "by the sudden fortissimo of drums and trumpets and fifes, bursting into the breadth of the piazza in a grand storm of sound—a roar, a blast, and a whistling…reducing the members of the closest group to a state of deaf isolation" (ibid).

This "state of deaf isolation" is a passing phrase—and a transitory experience—in a scene more ostensibly concerned with Tito's clandestine relations with Tessa, yet the notion that roars and blasts interfere not only with overt communication, but also with a listener's awareness of anything beyond the self becomes central to Eliot's methodology for moderating and perfecting the narrative soundscape. Characters' sonic struggles in *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola* lay the groundwork for *Middlemarch*'s metatextual experiment in fostering human attention. But the motif of excessive sound as an isolating or self-enclosing force is one that runs throughout her fiction—evident, for example, in Maggie Tulliver's description in *The Mill on the Floss* of the "dreamy deafness" caused by "the rush of the water and the booming of the mill…[which are] like a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond" (10).

Silence, on the other hand, has the power in *Romola* to deepen and enhance an experience of relatedness, underlining Eliot's conviction that extraneous sensory input distracts and detracts from consciousness of another. The novel's rare depictions of loving contentment

have one situational feature in common: quietude.[197] Just after Romola and Tito's first kiss—and long before the relationship comes to represent a betrayal to them both—the narrator remarks, "They were both contented to be silent and separate, for that first blissful experience of mutual consciousness was all the more exquisite for being unperturbed by immediate sensation" (116). The counterintuitive link between silence, separateness, and "mutual consciousness" in this scene hinges on an implicit distinction between separateness and alienation or disconnection. Under Eliot's conception, two persons can be separate—and entirely aware of that separation—and yet share in mutual consciousness.[198] Shared consciousness does not derive from a blurring between self and other, but, rather, from a heightened attunement to the other that is possible in the absence of perturbing sensations. This is what *Middlemarch* strives to attain in every page.

The power to distinguish that Eliot deemed fundamental to humans' perception of others, the world around them, and their role within the collective comes into play when the attention is not overburdened by a flood of stimuli. Romola later compares her early experience of love to "a little child that sits in stillness among the sunny flowers" (303). Eliot also recorded a poignant example in her journal of how it looks when an attenuated soundscape enables one to focus more sharply on the limited data that *is* present:

> That quiet which seems the deeper because one hears the delicious dip of the oar (when not disturbed by clamorous church bells) leaves the eye in full liberty and strength to take in the exhaustless loveliness of color and form. [Italy, 1860][199]

---

[197] In another example, the narrator remarks, "The fretted summer shade, and stillness, and the gentle breathing of some loved life near—it would be a paradise to us all, if eager thought…had not long since closed the gates" (105-6).
[198] This unique conception of a shared (separate) existence is also apparent in Eliot's descriptions of her and Lewes's working and living habits. She tells Mrs. Congreve in a letter from October 23, 1861, "Charley is going to Switzerland for his holiday next month. We [she and Lewes] shall enjoy our dual solitude."
[199] From *The Complete Works of George Eliot, Volume VII: Life and Letters* (Vol. II).

In this recollection from her time in Venice, Eliot enjoys the "full liberty and strength" of her perceptive powers precisely because she is immersed in a quiet so deep that even the dip of an oar stands forth with distinction—a set of circumstances that resonates with Amy Dorrit's ability to distinguish Arthur Clennam's footfalls on the Iron Bridge, as I discuss in Chapter One. Eliot's parenthetical implies that the "clamorous" bells, or any similarly jarring sound, would impede her appraisal and full appreciation of these surroundings.

Eliot strengthens this connection between enhanced perception and social consciousness in *Romola* by emphasizing the vital information that a "fine ear" (48)—i.e., an especially perceptive witness—might collect, and which would otherwise be lost to human awareness. "A fine ear," for example, "would have detected in [Romola's] clear voice and distinct utterance, a faint suggestion of weariness struggling with habitual patience" (ibid). But no fine ear is present, and it falls to the narrator alone to know and share in this aspect of Romola's lived experience. Even more disconcerting, as *Romola*'s narrator later warns, "It is the way with half the truth amidst which we live, that it only haunts us and makes dull pulsations that are never born into sound" (305). While there is much behind the "veil"—or "on the other side of silence"—that humans will never know or hear, Eliot accepts as moral obligation the endeavor to grasp as much of the available material about our fellow beings as possible. For character, narrator, and author, doing so requires taking the soundscape into one's own hands.

5 Self-Induced Silence and Social Responsibility in *Romola*

In *Romola*, it becomes clear that silence is a condition one must generate for oneself, as a buffer and an aid for the individual mind. Piero di Cosimo is the novel's predominant example of an

inhabitant who does just this. Particularly sensitive to urban noise and resentful of its impact on his perception and creativity, Piero takes measures to limit—or filter—what reaches his ears:

> Entering the court on which Piero's dwelling opened, Tito found the heavy iron knocker on the door thickly bound round with wool and ingeniously fastened with cords. Remembering the painter's practice of stuffing his ears against obstructive noises, Tito was not much surprised at this mode of defense against visitors' thunder…Tito was moving away, blaming himself for wasting his time on this visit…when a little girl entered the court with a basket of eggs on her arm, went up to the door, and standing on tip-toe, pushed up a small iron plate that ran in grooves, and putting her mouth to the aperture thus disclosed, called out in a piping voice, "Messer Piero!" (176)

While Tito's "modest" rapping and "more importunate attempt to shake the door" prove ineffectual, Piero appears in response to this young girl's simple summons (ibid). His painting studio, as Tito discovers, is further insulated by the "dank luxuriance" of a bordering thicket that seems "to penetrate even within the walls of the wide and lofty room" (178). Altogether, the wool, ingenious cords, and lush greenery form a second layer of defense for Piero, who is already in the habit of stuffing his ears with tow.

Piero's methodology for sound-proofing his body and workspace is intriguing not only because it enables him to perceive much that other characters miss, but also because of its basis in selectivity. His devices function as filters rather than outright barriers. His door modifications, for example, prevent uninvited callers from producing any distracting "thunder" while allowing initiated visitors (the little girl with the eggs) to make themselves known. It's not that *no* sound can reach Piero in his studio, it's that only a select few can. Neither is the painter outrightly antisocial.[200] He frequents Nello's barbershop—arguably the hub of Florentine social life in

[200] In a 2012 George Eliot Memorial Lecture entitled, "*Romola*'s Artists," Leonée Ormond points out the intentionality behind Eliot's more social depiction of Piero di Cosimo: "George Eliot did not take over Vasari's

Romola—and inserts his "ear-stuffing" (83) only at strategic moments (i.e., when Nello wastes his breath in praise of Tito).[201] His work as a painter necessitates this exposure to broader society: he must "lie in wait for the secrets of color that were sometimes to be caught from the floating of banners and the chance grouping of the multitude" (ibid).

Because Piero di Cosimo deals only with a curated set of stimuli, he can focus all the more intently on the information present to his senses. This, I argue, is why his discernment outpaces every other character's in *Romola*. He recognizes Tito's aesthetic fitness for the role of a traitor in their first encounter and intuits Baldassarre as the source of his fear—insights that he concretizes in a painting seen first by Tito (before its completion) and later by Romola. As Piero holds the painted likeness up to its living subject, Tito, he defines his creative work in opposition to the noise-making of other living things: "Fowls cackle, asses bray, women chatter, and philosophers spin false reasons…I am an animal that paints instead of cackling, or braying, or spinning lies" (180). The silent technology of his painting "speaks" volumes without adding noise to the soundscape. It propounds truth. Tito is horrified by the painting's poignant "blending of the terrible with the gay" (180), and Romola, after seeing it, "c[an] not help putting together the two facts of the chain armor and the encounter mentioned by Piero, between her husband and the prisoner" (244).

---

portrait of the artist wholesale, as she shows Piero in company with others rather than as a loner" (18, *George Eliot Review* 2013: 44).

[201] See, for example, Piero's remonstrance on p. 246: "*Va*, Nello…thy tongue runs on as usual, like a mill when the Arno's full—whether there's grist or not." Later in the scene, he defends his sonic sensitivity, claiming, "I have a particular sensibility to loud sounds; it has nothing to do with my courage or my conscience," and, later still, when it becomes "clear that Piero's disinclination towards Tito was not shared by the company…[the painter] took the tow from his scarsella and stuffed his ears in indignant contempt, while Nello went on triumphantly" (ibid).

Tito's self-recognition and Romola's enlightenment after viewing Piero's painting demonstrate that the artist's unusual perceptiveness has social as well as personal value. Importantly, this outward ripple of benefit stems from Piero's careful safeguarding of own his cognitive powers—his defense against the state of overwhelm that rendered Latimer passive and dull. In a passage from *Principles of Psychology* that recalls *Romola*'s discriminating artist figure, William James compares selective attending, with all its ethical weight, to the work of a sculptor: like a sculptor with a block of raw material, observers face "the primordial chaos of sensations" and must determine which parts of the original mass will go and which will, finally, remain (289). James goes on to argue, however, that "the rejected portions and the selected portions of the original world-stuff are to a great extent the same" from one mind to the next (290). Eliot diverges greatly from this assumption in *Romola*'s depiction of a social collective that differs in nothing more widely than in what its individual figures may notice. What is obvious to one character is imperceptible to another, depending largely on environment and circumstance.[202]

Within the ebb and flow of titular character Romola's humanitarianism, Eliot positions silence all the more clearly as a potential but dangerously self-interested solution to the onslaught of urban living and information overflow. This is apparent, for example, in the silence that prevails as Romola flees her social responsibilities and again when she is most engaged in fulfilling them. During her first attempt to leave Florence and the social burdens it contains, she asks her

[202] *Romola*'s narrator plays with this dynamic quite often, drawing on the unevenness among various characters' knowledge and perception to build suspense and utilizing the reader's greater store of knowledge for dramatic irony (as when Romola runs across Tito and Tessa's child but does not fully perceive the resemblance, p. 433-4).

godfather to “help to cover [her] lot in silence” and, cloaked in nun’s garb and armed with a rosary, departs “almost as quietly as a grey phantom…into the silent street” (312). Robed in silence for this act of self-preservation, she also exudes a quietude during her ministrations to the needful in Florence and in an unnamed village across the Mediterranean.

Romola uses silence to her own distinct ends in an episode of the novel that crystalizes Eliot’s ambivalence about it as an entity that can both forward and detract from social responsiveness. When Romola finally does abandon the city of Florence after the execution of her godfather, Bernardo del Nero, her exodus unfolds in an exceptional stillness. Bereft of her sense of duty and any ties of “strong affection” (471), she finds herself “weary of this stifling crowded life” (473) and wants “to rest in the still solitude, instead of going back to the noise and heat” that represent shared human life (475). Resigning herself to the random chance of an unpiloted boat, she pushes off, with “no living thing in sight, no sound but the lulling monotony of the lapping waves” (475). It is a journey that signals Romola’s renunciation of all “claims” upon her, in light of which silence could be read as a mere blanket for her egotism. Yet this drifting away—and the period of silence that follows it—also form the prelude to her greatest act of social service yet, when she rehabilitates a town devastated and divided by plague.

Romola disappears from the diegetic space of the novel for seven chapters after she pushes off from the shore—another layer of silence that, in its absoluteness, more fully represents her separation from all other living things and all human events during this period. She floats in a realm apart, defined entirely by the self and by individual experience, a “passive existence” that Eliot calls “a Lethe” (518). This state of oblivion, marked by the “exquisiteness of subtle indefinite sensation” (ibid), constitutes the utmost danger that can arise from filtering

out—or utterly silencing—the world around. For Romola, like Latimer, the rest of the world now falls within the "zone of anesthesia" that Féré and Binet would warn of later in the century (239).[203] Her recuperation from this state reflects a significant progression beyond Latimer's trajectory in *The Lifted Veil*: the moderated but less absolute form of insulation represented by the remote village environment will enable her, finally, to balance individual need with social responsibility.

Scholars such as Kelly E. Battles, Jacob Jewusiak, and Christopher Herbert characterize Romola's journey to this silent, unnamed village as a rupture in the novel's usual narrative mode,[204] but no one has pinpointed the soundscape's unusual dynamics during this episode as a key to understanding Romola's negotiation between self and community. Undulations in the soundscape mirror her transitions between a state of enhanced reflection and moral insight and periods of concerted social action. When she first awakens near the village, she notes that "no sound came across the stillness" (519). Her troubling "oblivion" discussed above gives way to distinct consciousness and an "attitude of contemplation" until "a piercing cry" reaches her from "across the stillness" (ibid). It is this cry—this spike in the soundscape—that calls Romola to action and sets her rescue of the village in motion. But there is something more to be recognized

[203] Cited in Crary, 39. Alfred Binet and Charles Féré, *Le magnetism animal*. Paris: Felix Alcan, 1888, pp. 239. (No translated edition available.) According to Binet and Féré, "the simple fact of attention" entails "a concentration of the whole mind on a single point, resulting in the intensification of the perception of this point and producing all around it a *zone of anesthesia*; attention increases the force of certain sensations while it weakens others."

[204] Battles calls Romola's time in the village a form of "temporal rupture" and a "temporary respite that allows her to achieve a balanced perspective of her place as an individual situated within history" (231-2) while Jewusiak likens it to a "dream sequence" (868). According to Herbert, Eliot "casts off from the mode of realistic fiction" with this episode (207).

in this chain of events: only in the prevailing stillness, where "no sound from Florence" buffets her (519), could she have distinguished this particular plaint and tracked it directly to its source.

Even beyond the plane of Romola's personal engagement, the silence that hovers over this village has ambivalence at its core. While its stillness makes it an apt place of rest and enables a listener such as Romola to distinguish, locate, and respond to stimuli, it is also an indicator of the death, depopulation, and debility that has already taken place. Silence both signals the trouble at hand and, in aiding Romola, contributes to its rectification. Jewusiak argues that Romola's "bizarre intervention in the plague village…replaces the myopia of her personal responsibilities with an expansive sense of social responsibility" (867), but her successful response to the need at hand is possible precisely because the "objects requiring [her] sympathetic response" have been narrowed by the ravages of plague.[205] If, as Jewusiak claims, Eliot's fiction "underlines the 'ethical importance of particularizing'" (858), it does so with the painful awareness that particularizing—or distinguishing, to use my term—is only possible within a more circumscribed realm of experience.

Silence ushers in the village sequence and concludes Romola's time there—a bookending that highlights its pivotal role in the work that unfolds while she's there, and in the work to come after. For Romola, silence provides access to moral insight and a widened perspective that aren't otherwise available. While it threatens, at unmoderated levels, to envelope her entirely in a world of her own, it is also her access point for seeing—and then acting in accordance with—her

[205] Jewusiak claims earlier that "*Romola* presents the reality that there are too many objects requiring a sympathetic response at any given time" (854).

place in the larger collective. This is most evident in Eliot's depiction of the "silent wintry hours" that close the village episode:

> In those silent wintry hours when Romola lay resting from her weariness, her mind, travelling back over the past, and gazing across the undefined distance of the future, saw all objects from a new position. Her experience since the moment of her waking in the boat had come to her with as strong an effect as that of the fresh seal on the dissolving wax…she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried aloud to be done…The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. (527)

Amanda Anderson notes Eliot's impulse to "mediate between sympathetic immersion and detached analysis and judgement" (15)—two positions that Jewusiak deems "extremely difficult, if not impossible [to reconcile]" (866). Yet Romola's silent hours seem to facilitate just such a mediation. Her mind covers "undefined distance[s]" in space and time, seeing all things anew, while she remains unmistakably present to (and grounded in) the concrete acts and exchanges that shaped her daily life in the village.

Romola's experiences illuminate a new, more sustainable pattern of altruistic social engagement: silent contemplation followed by concentrated action. Standing in opposition to the "vacillation," "extreme and impulsive changes of mind," and "uncontrollable wavering between devotion and rejection" that typify her behavior for much of the novel (Herbert 202), this new pattern closely resembles the practices of Victorian Quakers. According to Arianna Reilly, *Romola*'s narrator "presents egoism as the prerequisite for all meaningful and inspired action" (641)—a claim that maps with Piero's and Romola's utilization of silence as an egocentric yet critical facet of their social contributions. Romola's "baptism" by silence propels her to return to Florence and take up the claims and responsibilities that she threw off when the shock of a broken trust had "stunned her sympathy" (Eliot 527).

For the characters in *Romola*, silence serves as an important buffering mechanism and thereby opens a space for perspective—revealing where and how to direct one's energies. Nevertheless, it continues to represent, as it did for Latimer, the limits of what humankind can (and more importantly, is *willing* to) attend to, including our fellow beings. The strategies that Romola and di Cosimo employ to cut through the chaos and falsity that surrounds them—in the interest of moral insight and artistic production, respectively—are prototypes for the later and more ethically informed approaches of Middlemarchean characters such as Dorothea.

6 *Middlemarch*'s Modulated Soundscape (1871)

By the time she composed her 1871 masterwork *Middlemarch*, Eliot had established attention as a limited yet vital social capacity. Her concern with environmental stimuli and their propensity to stunt this capacity further by pulling it in competing (and often unfruitful) directions had only increased in the years since *Romola*'s publication. To cultivate the kind of attention that could engender moral sentiment, extraneous "noise"—conceived in Eliot's work both literally, as aural stimuli, and as a metonym for sensory oversaturation and modern distraction—would have to be filtered out. Eliot undertook this task in her penultimate novel, painstakingly curating its diegetic soundscape in order to model an environment more conducive to human attention.

In this section I argue, first, that Eliot carries out a severe curtailing of the sensory register in *Middlemarch* in order to concentrate readers' and characters' attention on that consciousness of other beings which is the basis of sympathy and social cohesion. She turns down the volume, so to speak, on much of what readers and characters would ordinarily "hear" in a realist novel—stray sounds and details that might deflect the attention—by deemphasizing

and even excising sonic description. In striking contrast to *Romola*, *Middlemarch*'s diegetic soundscape remains largely unelaborated. I argue, secondly, that the moral upshot of this selectivity—made apparent in the novel's metatextual discussions of aurality and through the figure of Dorothea Casaubon—is the emergence of a mode of attention capable of registering the quiet suffering and quotidian experiences that, when heard, unite one being with another.

Eliot's conception of the "roar" that represents this potent yet unheard material appears in its most defined form in *Middlemarch*. After describing the disillusionment of the idealistic and newly married Dorothea Casaubon, Eliot's narrator remarks:

> Some discouragement…is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of the roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (194)

Setting up a dichotomy between novelty—or, the "unusual"—and the everyday, Eliot figures human attention as a woefully blunted and restricted capacity, especially in its grasp of the experiences of others. Mankind, with its "coarse emotion," exercises a level of consciousness that scarcely breaks the surface of "ordinary human life." It acknowledges only the new, the extraordinary, and (as Eliot makes clear in *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola*) the self-interested.[206] The narrator's admission, however, that "our frames could hardly bear much" of this heightened

[206] Hermann von Helmholtz speaks to the power that novelty exerts over human attention in his 1867 *Treatise on Physiological Optics*. He explains, "As soon as the interest in one object has been exhausted, and there is no longer anything new in it to be perceived, [the attention] is transferred to something else, even against our will. When we wish to rivet [the attention] on an object, we must constantly seek to find something novel about it, and this is especially true when other powerful impressions of the sense are tugging at it and trying to distract it" (498).

awareness recalls Latimer's wracked and wasted frame, and—in a turn that closes out the passage—repositions this circumscription as a protective mechanism: a necessary shortcoming.

While other senses play an important role in this 1871 formulation—"keen vision and feeling" combine with hearing to provide an unprecedented degree of awareness—Eliot relies on aural metaphor to demarcate the limits of our capacities (e.g. we cannot hear the grass grow).[207] Human beings, ill-equipped to handle a fuller knowledge of their own species, would *die* in the face of a "roar" that represents cognizance of all living matter. Her decision to fix silence as the thing that stands, quite materially, between humans and the cognizance they cannot bear—metaphorized, once again, as sensory overload—makes it the most significant entity in the passage, worthy of both respect and apprehension. Silence marks the boundary lines of sustainable attention and, for Eliot, it signifies everything that exists below the threshold of our perception—a mass of muted material, like Dorothea's marital sorrows, that passes unheard and unknown and yet constitutes much of the texture of shared human experience.

To the limited extent that it is possible to enhance and direct human attention without exhausting it, Eliot posits environmental modification as the primary avenue toward this ideal. Decades before the late-century psychological, physiological, and philosophical treatments of attention, *Middlemarch* pinpoints the reduction of ambient noise as a foundational way to support this capacity. Working under a conception first outlined in *The Lifted Veil*, wherein excessive sonic input typifies a more global cognitive overtaxation, Eliot dampens sound at both the narrative and diegetic levels—that is, in terms of what readers read and characters hear—in

[207] The wadding of "stupidity" that insulates man from cognitive chaos and dysfunction has aural resonances as well.

order to attune both groups to those unobtrusive claims on human sympathy that too often go unheard.[208] The curtailing of novel and intermittent stimuli that might pull, divide, or distract the attention gives observers the bandwidth to appreciate the overlooked tragedies of intimate daily experience. This paring back of narrative description is mirrored by the quietude that marks the novel's diegetic scenes of sympathetic exchange. In both cases, sound attenuation fosters the attunement on which relatedness depends.

In *Middlemarch*, the diegetic soundscape thus becomes an arena for refining and displaying the ideal conditions for attentiveness. Evidence of this more muted soundscape takes a number of forms, including fewer descriptions of characters' material environments. With the incoming railway line, for example, characters discuss and forecast a *threat* of noise—"the cows had hitherto grazed in a peace unbroken by astonishment" and will "all cast their calves" at its arrival, according to Mrs. Waule (553)—but there is no sonic evidence of trains or construction yet to be heard. Beyond a few locations that Eliot's narrator overtly deems quiet, such as the Yew Tree Walk and Dorothea's blue boudoir,[209] the spaces that characters traverse and inhabit come with little indication of the soundscape at hand. Rebecca Hildebrand notes this "absence of detail in the described world of *Middlemarch*" and argues, along similar lines, that Eliot's narrator "works aggressively to 'curtail' the disruptive readerly potential of description" (999). She connects Eliot's excision of detail to a growing tendency in Victorian scientific circles to

[208] To express this more simply, aural experience is once again taken up as a representative for much larger concepts and concerns—most importantly, as microcosm in which to study our awareness of and concern for the experiences of our fellow beings. For more on reading as orality/hearing, see Ivan Kreilkamp's *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (2005) and Nicholas Dames's *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction* (2007).

[209] Dorothea's boudoir is characterized by quietude, e.g., on p. 273-74 and p. 538-39. The Yew Tree Walk, where Casaubon takes his exercise, is even more overtly connected to silence and stillness — see p. 424.

conceive of the "surrounding world not…aesthetically, but instead as intimately, dynamically, and materially involved in human life" (1000).

While Eliot was intent on depicting aural experience and the sonic texture of the diegetic realm in *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola*, many of *Middlemarch*'s defining scenes—including those which transpire in the city center of nineteenth-century Rome—give no evidence of aurality at all. Dorothea's disorienting introduction to Rome (and, simultaneously, to married life) during her wedding journey offers a useful point of contrast between *Middlemarch*'s muted soundscape and the sonic chaos of *Romola*'s Florence. While there is a difference of over three hundred years between Romola's life in Florence and Dorothea's visit to Rome, the advance of time—theoretically speaking—should only have increased the ambient noise of urban Italian life.

In a passage that foregrounds the violent clash between Dorothea's sensibilities and Rome's perplexities, the newlywed experiences tumult, confusion, jar, and shock—a set of terms that feels quite familiar after *Romola*—but, breaking with the trend set by Eliot's earlier texts, these terms no longer signify aural violence. The diegetic Rome of Dorothea's honeymoon offers, ostensibly, nothing to hear. It operates instead as a collection of visual tropes:

> Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reference; the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world: all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory…the vastness of St Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the

> attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery…spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina. (193-4)

The action, force, and urgency in this extended description proceed without evidence that Dorothea has ears as well as eyes with which to take in the "glut" that is Rome. The "struggling" life forms, "vast wreck," and confused mixture of signals in this urban environment have—almost inexplicably after the confused tumult of Florence—no aural dimension. The intensity of Eliot's diction in this passage signals the novelty of this encounter for Dorothea, but environmental impact manifests here as a "disease of the retina" rather than a ringing of the ears.

Eliot's evacuation of the diegetic soundscape is also evident in her refusal to differentiate between environments with vastly different aural textures. If the Middlemarchean soundscape were intended as a faithful rendition of outward experience and historical reality, the reader could expect Dorothea's transition from central Rome to Lowick Manor to present a sharp aural contrast. While the narrator's opening description of life at Lowick does excite some sense of its quietude, it contains no explicit references to sound or silence. Instead of highlighting a tension between opposing sonic environments, her narration of Dorothea's homecoming offers a visual continuity with the "long vistas of white forms" and "breathing…degradation" of Rome:

> …in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room into the blue-green boudoir…she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world…The bright fire of dry oak-boughs burning on the dogs seemed an incongruous renewal of life and glow… (273)

The closest reference to sonic phenomena that appears in this depiction of Lowick comes with Dorothea's absorption "in looking out on the still, white enclosure which made her visible world" (ibid)—a context in which stillness quite obviously refers to the visual rather than the aural.

One could argue that Eliot's disengagement from the diegetic soundscape indicates a lack of interest in that arena of experience—evidence, perhaps, of the sovereignty of the eye over the ear for Eliot—but I argue instead that this withholding of sonic detail represents a further stage in her creative negotiation between an authentic depiction of sensory experience and the training of human attention for sympathetic ends. Eliot's reader is meant to register this lapse in aural signification—to sense, on some level, a quietude in the narrative experience—and to profit from the heightened ability to home in on another's experience. Said another way, the relative monotony of *Middlemarch*'s restrained soundscape frees human attention to grapple with the experience of the Other in all its raw emotional complexity.

Middlemarch's commitment to concentrating attention—paring back "that tempting range of relevancies called the universe" (141)—brings a threat of narrowness with which the narrator must constantly contend. Accordingly, the decrease in sonic description that I have outlined coincides with a proliferation of metaphors directing readerly attention to the metaphysical realm and to the act of narration itself.[210] Eliot's narrator addresses her role as metatextual

[210] For example, the narrator's observation, before entering the Garth home: "In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up" (399); and her query, "Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? If it happens to have been cut in stone, though it lie face downmost for ages on a forsaken beach…it may end by letting us into the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago: — this world being apparently a huge whispering gallery" (412).

curator at several points in the narrative. In one of the novel's most widely cited passages, she deems herself a "belated historian," at the mercy of the chaos and rapidity of the modern day:

> We belated historians must not linger after [Fielding's] example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe. (141)

Much of the scholarly interest in this passage centers on the web metaphor that has become vital to George Eliot studies and Victorian literary studies more broadly. There has been far less commentary, however, on the influence that Eliot's metaphor for concentration ("all the light I can command must be concentrated…and not dispersed") may have had on the metaphors used in late-century discussions of attention.

Eliot anticipated thinkers such as Wilhelm Dilthey and John Dewey by more than a decade with this apt figure, which lays as much stress on what the narrator's (or observer's) attention *cannot* cover as on what it can. In 1883, Dilthey envisioned attention as a kind of spotlight that illuminates fragments of a much larger landscape. He explained, "If I am looking out the window and perceive a landscape, the light of consciousness may well distribute itself evenly over the entire landscape. But as soon as I try to apprehend a single tree or even a branch in greater detail, the consciousness which I direct toward the rest of the landscape diminishes" (313-14). Eliot's "particular web" of "certain human lots" aligns with Dilthey's single tree or branch. Determined to provide the "greater detail" that is only available with a narrowed focus, this belated chronicler refuses to disperse her attention less discriminately over a wider range.

John Dewey's 1886 metaphor for attention in his textbook, *Psychology*, bears an even more striking resemblance to Eliot's figure in *Middlemarch*. "In attention," he wrote,

> we focus the mind, as the lens takes all the light coming to it, and instead of allowing it to distribute itself evenly concentrates it to a point of great light and heat. So the mind, instead of diffusing consciousness over all the elements presented to it, brings it all to bear upon some one selected point, which stands out with unusual brilliancy and distinctness. (134)

Just as Eliot's narrator implied over a decade earlier, Dewey argued that man must bring all the attention he can muster to bear on one object or entity in order to see it with any real "distinctness." While the metaphors that Eliot, Dilthey, and Dewey deployed are visual, the larger principle at hand is that of filtering (or limiting) the range of data in order to improve focus—a principle that, for *Middlemarch*, operates most fully in the sonic realm. The passage's opening simile—an obscure reference to "chat" carried on "as if…from a camp-stool in a parrot-house" (Eliot 141)—foregrounds a Middlemarchean distaste for delivering information from within the noisy, chaotic, and disordered environments that characterize modern life.[211] Projecting one's voice above a storm of noise is no way to be heard.

While there is a physiological aural threshold below which it is a fact of nature that humans cannot hear—as Fechner's 1850s experiments established—Eliot's narrator grapples with a far more subjective and morally weighted *attention* threshold. As a chronicler of human lives, she must determine in each narrative moment what will fall below a reader's or character's level of attention. If the moral aim of enhanced sympathy is to be met, the attention cannot be

[211] In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), an Eliot novel unique in its "present day" setting, Gwendolen Harleth depicts "the conditions of this world" as "a hurrying roaring crowd in which she seemed to have got astray" (198). She notes archery as one activity that is "freer from those noisy crowding conditions which spoil most modern pleasures" (83).

overburdened or underutilized. Her readers must be able to hear their fellow beings distinctly, without being submerged in the din. William James drove home the ethical stakes of an attention threshold in his sweeping assertion, "The practical and theoretical life of the whole species, as well as individual beings, results from the selection which the habitual direction of our attention involves…Each of us literally *chooses*, by his way of attending to things, what sort of a universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit" (424).

Unveiling the "distinctness" of individual lives may inspire greater sympathy and relatedness, but it is a phenomenon with a regrettably limited range of expansion—as Eliot shows in text after text. She manifests this dilemma in the famous *Middlemarch* aside: " — but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" (278). *Middlemarch* became Eliot's grand experiment in how capacious a focused attention could be under the right conditions. Just how many characters or fellow beings, her narrator seems to ask, *can* fit within the narrow beam of our fullest attention? If perceiving inherently means excluding—as Dewey, Dilthey, and James joined Eliot in contending—and if attending is sequential (as Eliot suggests with the "dissolving view" of Latimer's mind), then listening to Dorothea means that, for the moment, the reader simply cannot hear Casaubon.

In light of Eliot's engagement with the concept of environmental influence,[212] Hildebrand propounds a "new reading of sympathy in Eliot's fiction as a triangular process that relies on the environment as a third term that mediates between self and other" (1001). Her discussion centers on "atmospheric phenomena" in the novel (999), such as weather, but this triangular

[212] As the narrator says of Dorothea in the "Finale": "…there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (838). This "outside" includes social *and* physical influences.

formulation of sympathy is also useful within the context of sonic stimuli and the ethical deployment of attention. If the diegetic environment is a "third term" that "mediates between self and other" in the sympathetic process, it follows that environmental conditions can either disrupt or support this process, depending on their impact on human attention.

For Eliot's text to serve its highest purpose—that "rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right" (letter to Mrs. Peter Taylor, 18 July 1878)—readers and characters alike must be able to "tune in" to the minds and experiences of their fellows. This section has examined the significance of *Middlemarch*'s muted soundscape for readerly attention and the experience of sympathy it aims to facilitate, but sonic attenuation also enhances the emotional connection between characters such as Dorothea Casaubon and Will Ladislaw or physician Tertius Lydgate and scholar Edward Casaubon. In "Silence, Gesture, and Meaning in *Middlemarch*" (1996), Amy Levin asserts, "while significant verbal communication is virtually impossible, Eliot deposits clusters of meaning in moments of silence or near silence" (23). Levin reads near-silent episodes such as Will Ladislaw's observation of Dorothea at the Vatican as opportunities for characters to gain "insight into another" or experience a "growing self-consciousness" (25).

The situated scenes that punctuate this highly figurative text—i.e., scenes in which the narrator gives concrete evidence of the surrounding environment and a character's location in space—provide additional opportunities for Eliot's narrator to model the sympathetic exchange that attentive minds are capable of under the right conditions. Such scenes generally take the form of a seated interview between two figures—from Dorothea and Will, to Lydgate and

Casaubon, to Dorothea and fellow newlywed Rosamond Vincy[213]—and with Eliot's turn from the delineation of diegetic sound, quietude reigns in these moments as a kind of environmental given. Expanding her sympathetic reach with each of these intimate encounters, Dorothea Casaubon ultimately emerges as an embryonic figure for the ideally and ethically attentive mind.

7 Modeling an Ethics of Attention

The form of attention that Eliot advances in *Middlemarch* and throughout her oeuvre is fundamentally trained outward—to things "apart from" oneself—in a manner directly opposed to Latimer's morbid fixation and overburdened egoism in *The Lifted Veil*. While Eliot referred to the stimulated attention of readers in "The Natural History of German Life," her fictional characters provide evolving examples of the outwardly and morally attentive observer. *Romola*'s Piero di Cosimo, though still largely concerned with his own convenience, turns a scrupulous lens outward to assess his fellow Florentines and uses his artwork to surprise others into perceptions from which they have been hiding.

Middlemarch's Dorothea Casaubon constitutes Eliot's most evolved example of the attentive mind—a distinction that becomes apparent across a series of interactions with figures such as Ladislaw, Lydgate, and Rosamond. As Levin emphasizes, silence—or, more accurately for the argument of this chapter, the absence of sonic signifiers—is a key condition during many of these intimate encounters. Living within the more muted soundscape that Eliot's narrative

[213] For examples of such interviews, see pages 189, 191, 204-9, 362, 630. Alan Palmer calls these intimate pairings "dyads," wherein two people merge to form one "cognitive system" (429).

selectivity (not to mention *Middlemarch*'s provincial setting[214]) makes possible, Dorothea turns her attention purposefully from one figure in need to the next. While the "conditions of an imperfect social state" stunt the grander scheme of her life purpose (838)—an instantiation of Eliot's conviction that individual failure is the inevitable byproduct of a flawed social system—the individuals who do come under Dorothea's consideration receive an unwavering attention. The novel's uniquely minimalized soundscape is at the root of this focusing power: her ability to commune with and contribute to another deepens as the range of extraneous stimuli narrows.

In the steadfastness of Dorothea's attention to another and the results that this state of attunement produces—often resolving complex emotional needs—Eliot posits attention as a primary route to relatedness and, through that, to social contribution. After Lydgate becomes entangled in financial obligations and dark suspicions, Dorothea's painful consciousness of his position leaves her "yearning to give relief" and eager to "show her human fellowship" (761). During a pause in their opening conversation,

> Lydgate turned…and saw Dorothea's face looking up at him with a sweet trustful gravity. The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. That influence was beginning to act on Lydgate, who had for many days been seeing all life as one who is dragged and struggling amid the throng. He sat down again, and felt that he was recovering his old self in the consciousness that he was with one who believed in it. (762)

Dorothea's unbroken gaze is the signal of her undivided attention. Her alert presence—without need of speech—"quietens" Lydgate's perspective and fulfills his desperate need for solidarity.

---

[214] *Middlemarch*'s setting in provincial England allows Eliot to construct a more muted soundscape *without* breaking from the realism that is so vital to her literary style. In the absence of railways, machinery, and overpopulation, silence in *Middlemarch* can arise more naturally and more frequently. Eliot pushes the generic bounds less in this respect than contemporaries such as Dickens and Brontë, who build silence into ostensibly urban soundscapes.

The aural resides once again at the level of metaphor, with the "quieter masses" of rightened perspective. Instead of "struggling amid" an anonymized and indifferent "throng" that recalls the "deaf isolation" and faceless rabble of *Romola*'s city streets, Lydgate "g[ives] himself up, for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy, without any check of proud reserve" (ibid). Dorothea's attentiveness here becomes the outward expression of a "generous sympathy" that collapses the boundaries between them.

Silence may rarely appear as an environmental descriptor in *Middlemarch*, but it does function in the diegetic space as a sympathetic practice. Dorothea's silence in this and other moments reveals for readers just how socially-inflected the phenomenon can be. Her quiet presence opens a space in which—as Lydgate experiences in their meeting—perspectives can right themselves, the "wholeness" of a character stands forth in relief, and an avenue toward sympathy unfolds. The narrator dissects Dorothea's reticence on a number of occasions, always disclosing the composite of social concerns that reside within it. When Dorothea is "strangely quiet" (365) regarding the futility of Casaubon's great research endeavor, for example, she is in fact "adjusting herself to the…clearest perception [of the facts]" and exploring a new avenue of sympathy for her husband and his particular circumstances (ibid). On another occasion, in conversation with her uncle, Dorothea's silence signifies her "consciousness of a deeper relation between [herself and Will Ladislaw] which must always remain in consecrated secrecy" (773).

The narrator's descriptions of Dorothea's silence portray it as a thoroughly active condition—juxtaposing, as do many nineteenth-century physiological treatises, the stillness of the body (and, in Dorothea's case, vocal cords) with the activity of the mind. When Dorothea confronts the likelihood of Casaubon's premature death, "there was silence for a few moments,

while [she] sat as if she had been turned to marble, though the life within her was so intense that her mind had never before swept in so brief a time over an equal range of scenes and motives" (289). Stillness and reticence cloak an expansiveness of mental activity such as she has never experienced before. In his 1876 work, *The Functions of the Brain*, David Ferrier outlines an antagonistic relationship between physical motion—or outer activity—and attention. Just as Ferrier discovers a wealth of inner activity that depend on man's outward immobility, Eliot's narrator sees a myriad of social processes that thrive in silence.

Dorothea's dark night of the soul after she misinterprets a scene between Will Ladislaw and Rosamond Lydgate solidifies the novel's association of stillness with sympathy, right perspective, and solidarity. As morning dawns, the narrator observes, "It was not in Dorothea's nature, for longer than the duration of a paroxysm, to sit in the narrow cell of her calamity, in the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of its own" (787). Dorothea lingers over "every detail" of the scene she witnessed—a cognitive exercise facilitated by her "vacant" room and inner quietude—and, in doing so, refocuses her attention on a point outside herself: "Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life" (ibid). Training her perspective on the point at which her existence intersects with another's, Dorothea exits the "narrow cell" of her own egoism and recaptures the "vivid sympathetic experience" she had shared with Lydgate. This realignment climaxes in a keen sense of affinity with and obligation to the fellow beings she sees outside her window: "She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it…as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining" (788).

While muted soundscapes provide a conducive environment for the "raw material of moral sentiment" to take root ("German Life" 145), the holding of silence also actively enhances these sentiments for Dorothea and other characters. Checked in her outward discussion of Will by awareness of a "deeper relation between them," Dorothea perceives that "her silence shrouded her resistant emotion into a more thorough glow" (773). But it is Lydgate and Casaubon's encounter in the Yew-Tree Walk that positions silence most clearly as the foundation for that species of attention that engenders moral sentiment:

> When Lydgate entered the Yew-Tree Walk he saw Mr. Casaubon slowly receding with his hands behind him…It was a lovely afternoon; the leaves from the lofty limes were falling silently across the somber evergreens…there was no sound but the cawing of the rooks, which to the accustomed ear is a lullaby, or that last solemn lullaby, a dirge. Lydgate, conscious of an energetic frame in its prime, felt some compassion when the figure which he was likely soon to overtake turned round, and in advancing towards him showed more markedly than ever the signs of a premature age… (422)

With one of the most extensive descriptions of the soundscape to appear in the novel, this scene positions diegetic silence as a formative factor in the convergence between young promise and weary disappointment. Among the silently falling leaves, Lydgate notices most acutely the contrast between his own state and Casaubon's. Meanwhile, the dirge of the rooks—standing out against a backdrop of silence like the dip of the oar in the Venetian canals—conveys their shared consciousness of a coming shift (or cessation) in Casaubon's existence.

The spark of sympathy that Lydgate feels in this moment of recognition represents a brief foray into regions ordinarily below his threshold of attention. He is a man ill-equipped to "enter into the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy" (423), and—as the narrator admits in an echo of the roar passage—"there are many situations more sublimely tragic than the struggle of the soul with the demand to renounce a work which has been all the

significance of its life" (422). Casaubon's personal tragedy, like Dorothea's marital disillusionment, is likely to fall below the notice—and thus the sympathy or intervention—of his fellows. And yet, in the cognitive reprieve offered by the Yew-Tree Walk's silent shadows and "mute" trees (424), Lydgate does notice and, however briefly, empathize with the tragedy of ordinary life unfolding on what would ordinarily be the other side of silence.

As this chapter has unpacked, Eliot used her penultimate novel to enact a crucial truth in her moral philosophy: the limitation of external stimuli is requisite for the kind of penetrative attention that engenders human sympathy. Lydgate's ability to venture beyond his usual realm of attention in the Yew-Tree Walk is a signal that the reader, even outside the experience of reading, must cultivate silence and stillness in order to attend to his fellows—to see them in the "wholeness of [their] character" as Dorothea characteristically does (762). Experiencing others in such a manner is the access point, as Eliot saw it, to that more perfect love and those "divine moments" (363) fleetingly available to human beings.[215]

Silence's ever-increasing rarity in Victorian Britain continued to be felt and regretted over the final decades of the century, especially by city dwellers. As one London periodical writer expressed it shortly after the publication of *Middlemarch*,

> with regard to one of the best gifts of nature, we are well nigh in danger of suffering a total loss and know it not…"Silence" is that thing beyond all else, now most conspicuous by its absence. Not alone in matters material, or mechanical, is silence now clean gone out. Even the very bowels of the earth (Metropolitan) groan by reason of their perpetual disturbance… ("The Value of Silence" 254)

[215] Will feels "unspeakable content in his soul…that he was in the presence of a creature worthy to be perfectly loved," and "his own feelings for that moment were perfect, for we mortals have our divine moments" (363).

During the composition of her most famous works and for the remainder of her life, Eliot sought "delicious silence"[216] where she could. Writing in August 1871 from a countryside crisscrossed by the railway lines that *Middlemarch* foretold, she observed, "The train rushes by every now and then to make one more glad of the usual silence" (Letter to Mrs. Bray from 3 August 1871).

Concern about the degenerative effects of perpetual distraction and weakened attention would reach a crescendo by the 1890s, with social critic Max Nordau linking a failure in attentiveness with sociopathic behavior. "Weakness or want of attention," Nordau warned, "produces…in the first place false judgments respecting the objective universe, respecting the quality of things and their relations to each other" (56). Only in the hushed moments between one sonic interruption and the next could an author such as Eliot see—and thus depict—things in their right relations. Only in the enveloping quiet of an intimate interview could a feeling and "dangerously responsive" (793) creature such as Dorothea hope to commune fully with the object of her sympathy.[217] Shatter the human capacity for attention with a sustained chaos of sensory input, and humankind might be left with a society of Latimers.

[216] In a letter to Mrs. Cross on 14 June 1874, Eliot writes, "I have so much trust in your love for us that I feel sure you will like to know of our happiness in the secure peace of the country, and the good we already experience in soul and body from the sweet breezes over hill and common, the delicious silence, and the unbroken spaces of the day."
[217] During a drawing room interview between Dorothea and Rosamond, the narrator remarks that Dorothea has a "frame as dangerously responsive as a bit of finest Venetian crystal" (793).

Conclusion
Moments of Silence and Silent Rooms: The Legacy of Victorian Silence

Lamb and Carlyle laid the foundation in their public rhetoric for a conception of silence that emphasized its value in urban environments and social contexts. Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot, in turn, used the even more wide-reaching platform of the Victorian novel to demonstrate the vital role of silence in daily life. In their narratives, silence punctuates the roar of urban and industrial settings, making both physical and cognitive space for sympathetic exchange and creative production. It is an environmental condition that Dickens's characters deliberately seek—and find—in the midst of the city. Brontë's characters, meanwhile, take the soundscape into their own hands through the cultivation of quiet space. Acting in the interest of human attentiveness, Eliot's Middlemarchean narrator carries sonic intervention to an unprecedented level with her curtailing of the sensory register. She curates the soundscape for reader and character alike.

An apt figure for silence in the period, *Little Dorrit*'s Iron Bridge emblematized Dickens's conviction—adopted from fellow London-enthusiast Lamb—that silence had a rightful place in the Victorian city, even outside the bounds of the domestic sanctuary. His personal writings and fictional work convey the ever-increasing sensory bombardment that Londoners (and all city-dwellers) faced and the simultaneously rising importance of silence to their conceptions of self, sociality, and the act of writing. Dickens's fiction is alive to the social potential of a space of silence: a wealth of relations unfolds in the silences that his narratives contain. His strategic use of silent space in diegetic environments promotes balance, respite, and moral reflection.

I have argued that the networking and communication technologies underscored in Dickens scholarship often represented a threat to privacy, and with it, true intimacy. Though

silence would seem to be the anti-social network, in Dickens's fiction it offers a chance of unmediated connection that technologies such as the telegraph failed to provide. The value of silent space in Dickensian London lies in its promotion of social contact that transpires in person and reaches beyond language—facilitating connections that could not be intercepted or overheard. In *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, silence is a protected channel for sympathetic exchange.

Dickens's use of silence for social connection posited the moderation of sound as a way of prioritizing and protecting intimate exchanges. Silence provided a space for the intimate knowing of oneself, others, and the world around. Calling on technologies that were organic and manmade, fictional and material, Dickens built silence back into the urban environment, reinstating it in the diegetic soundscape in ways that ran counter to his realism. His personal habits and written work suggested that, however alienating it might initially seem, silence was actually indispensable to the web of human connectedness.

Much as the sonically insulated Iron Bridge represents a stable and recurring point of contact in Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam's nascent relationship, Lucy Snowe's hushed alley space is the privileged site for her personal and romantic development over the course of *Villette*. As I have shown, Brontë extended the role of silence in the Victorian novel beyond Dickens's intermittent and more qualified use of it. Her reliance on silent space for character development resembles Dickens's use of it for similar ends, but she took the interplay between character and soundscape a step further, granting her characters an active role in fashioning the fictional soundscape. In her work, author and character collaborate to produce silence through

means as diverse as landscaping, snowfall, silent slippers, and well-oiled door hinges, creating sonic oases in an "urban" soundscape that once again tests the bounds of Victorian realism.

One of Brontë's key interventions in Victorian literature was in the hybridity of the soundscape she created in *Villette*. Her narrative welds together urban and rural, breaking down the traditional juxtaposition between city bustle and provincial peace. *Villette*'s infrequent categorization as an urban novel suggests that what readers hear in the diegetic soundscape exerts greater influence than its ostensible location. Ultimately, Brontë's fiction insists that silence is not just beneficial but crucial to social processes and, further, that individuals can and must actively produce it. Its continued survival in her work depends on human agency. Lucy Snowe, Paul Emmanuel, and Madame Beck deploy silence as both a tool and a weapon, making it an integral part of their negotiations for position and autonomy. Together they enact a struggle for control that transpires as much in the sonic realm as it does in the visual.

While Brontë fractured the metonymic identification of urban space with noise, the latter nonetheless represents a more overt threat in her work than in Dickens's, interrupting relationships and togetherness, jeopardizing self-coherence and even sanity. Silence, meanwhile, remains expansive and complex in what it signifies. *Villette* portrays silence not as the absence of signs, but rather as a viscerally experienced embodiment of that foundational Derridean paradox: for Brontë, it represents presence and absence yoked together.

While Dickens and Brontë point to the repercussions of sonic oversaturation in their fiction, Eliot brought the Victorian conception of silence more explicitly into conversation with questions of attention and social cohesion. Her work foregrounds the ethical importance of man's ability to distinguish and the threat to attention that indistinguishable masses of urban

noise represented. In *The Lifted Veil*, *Romola*, and *Middlemarch*, she introduces a moderated deployment of silence as a solution to overstimulation, but her use of silence also highlights an ethical dilemma inherent in the act of attending. In order to attend to a fellow creature at the level of consciousness that engenders moral sentiment, one has to filter out a wealth of competing objects, narrowing a field of observation that could include one's fellow creatures.

The Lifted Veil and *Romola* convey the tension between mankind's limited focusing power and the superabundant stimuli of an urbanizing and modernizing England. Stressing the antagonism between attention and sonic bombardment in particular, these works warn of the deterioration of the sympathetic impulse if no effort is made to combat overstimulation. Eliot thus deems it an individual, narratorial, and authorial responsibility to foster attention by all means possible. Characters such as Piero di Cosimo and Romola deploy silence in the pursuit of mental clarity and right judgment, while *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea Casaubon comes to stand, in all of Eliot's canon, as the exemplar for an attentiveness to one's fellow beings that is the germ of moral sentiment.

Taking this responsibility a step further, Eliot's Middlemarchean narrator intervenes in the fictional soundscape to model environments—and a narrative style—conducive to attention and consequently, as I argue overall, to fellow-feeling. She strives to identify the degree of immersion in external stimuli at which human beings experience their greatest capacity for attention, relying on silence as a metaphorical and literal filter. Eliot's fiction manifests her ambivalence about silence, but it also reveals her conclusion that the social benefits of close attention outweigh the cost of exclusion.

Collectively, the writers in this study broadened silence far beyond what it had been acknowledged to signify and enable in the literature of earlier periods. Embraced as a positive force rather than an absence, lack, or void, it garnered a place in urban fiction and social practice alike. The example set by key Victorians in their literary and technological production of silence resonates to the present day, as is evident, for example, in the twenty-first-century popularity of silent retreats and noise-cancelling headphones. In a society more technologized than ever before, applications such as Zoom have taken up the mantle of safeguarding human attention, with noise-suppression filters intervening in the soundscape much as Eliot's narrator once did.

1 From Lamb to Woolf: Silence after the Great War

> *"Breathless they paused. Out there men raised their glance…*
> *And murmured, 'Strange, this! How? All firing stopped?'*
> *Aye; all was hushed. The about-to-fire fired not…"*
>
> — Thomas Hardy, "'And There Was a Great Calm' (On the Signing of the Armistice, November 11, 1918)"

At eleven o'clock on November 11, 1918, the Western Front fell silent, signaling an end to four years of constant war and to the most collectively traumatizing event that Western Europe had ever endured. The unremitting use of artillery fire during this four-year conflict solidified noise as a potent psychological weapon in modern warfare and left a flood of shell-shocked combatants in its wake.[218] Thomas Hardy commemorated the cessation of sound, motion, and bloodshed on that November morning in a poem written for the occasion. Contrasting the grim years during

[218] Sonic bombardment played a key role in the Great War, with both sides' reliance on the near-continuous use of artillery fire and explosives for years on end. Among the physiological symptoms of shell shock reported by combatants were chronic headache, tinnitus, and a ringing in the ear.

which men "pierced" and "yapped" with the "breathless" pause of their first post-war moment, Hardy's poem captured the aural significance of Armistice Day. His lines catalog the "hurtlings," "moan[s]," and "boom[s]" of war before halting in the final stanza with the briefest of statements: "Calm fell." With "silence in the sky," Hardy's "Spirit of Pity" ends the poem with her whispered, "Why?"

A watershed moment in British history and culture, the First World War became an inflection point for all that came after it, including the literary treatment of silence. The shifting social utility and reconceptualization of silence is reflected in the "Time Passes" section of Virginia Woolf's 1927 *To the Lighthouse*. A bridge between the opening and closing sections of the novel, this passage records the acoustic texture of the prewar, wartime, and postwar periods.[219] In the lead-up to Britain's involvement in World War I, a "swaying mantle of silence" cloaks the Ramsey family's abandoned summer home (129). In keeping with its literary genealogy, this silence is an active force. An absence made present, it inhabits and defines the space at hand. In a turn that echoes Dickens's darker apprehensions, however, this incarnation of silence is voracious: grasping and consuming, it folds animate sounds into itself and blankets the inanimate remnants of its former occupants.[220]

For modernist writers grappling with the postwar reality, silence remained indispensable to the creative act. Consider, for example, the cork-lined walls of Marcel Proust's Paris

[219] Much like Hardy's acoustic depiction of the Great War, Woolf's portrayal of that period refers to "ominous sounds like the measured blows of hammers dulled on felt," "the thud of something falling," and shrieks of agony (133).

[220] "Nothing it seemed could…disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence" (129-30).

apartment. Silence also retained the connotations of productivity and social force with which Victorian predecessors had imbued it, but it gained darker shadings in the wake of Europe's confrontation with war and death on an unforeseen scale. It became more firmly entangled with the implications of loss and absence that Lamb and Carlyle strove to shake off, often collapsed in literature with the missing voices of those who never returned from Belgium and France. But even with the addition—or perhaps reinstatement—of these darker iterations, silence only became more capacious in the collective mind. Modernist authors would put it to work in literature much as the Victorians had, calling on it to represent an ever larger number of things.

2 A New Shared Silence: Moments of Silence from Armistice Day to the Present

Silence's continuing importance as a social tool after World War I was crystalized by the initiation of a tradition that has lasted to the present day: the moment of silence. On November 11, 1919, Britain marked the anniversary of Armistice Day with a national Moment of Silence signed into law just one day earlier. King George V's royal decree called for the "complete suspension of all…normal activities" and further instructed, "All work, all sound, and all locomotion should cease, so that, in perfect stillness, the thoughts of everyone may concentrate on reverent remembrance…"[221] Omnibuses and pedestrians stopped in their tracks at eleven o'clock, as all British citizens paused to center their collective attention on the soldiers and civilians for whom the ceasefire had come too late. In their silence, the absent were made present once more.

[221] For more on the history of this tradition, see: Kayla Webley's "A Brief History of the Moment of Silence"; Miyuki Jokirana's "The little-known origin of the minute's silence"; and Joanna Scutts's "The Day Europe Fell Silent."

This November exercise was not Britain's first recorded instance of a national moment of silence—one was reportedly held in 1912 after the sinking of the Titanic[222]—but the two-minute silence held on Armistice Day became what Adrian Gregory calls "an immediate tradition" (Jokirana n.p.). Eric Hobsbawm deems it an "invented" one, arguing that the "rapidity and totality of its cultural embrace" gave it the illusion of "something that had always been there" (Scutts n.p.). Miyuki Jokirana of ABC Radio National adds, "the tradition of a minute's silence has been a feature at ceremonies marking nearly every tragedy of the twenty-first century," from the September 11th attacks to the Paris attacks and the killing of George Floyd (n.p.).

What shared silence provided in 1919—and still offers today—was largely what it made possible in the works of Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot: a space for coming together (whether cognitive or physical), a medium for intimate connection, a focusing of attention, and an enhancement of sympathy.[223]

Western use of a minute's silence in public life also crystalizes silence's continued blurring of the line between secular and spiritual. It occupies a space somewhere in-between—or at the junction of—the two realms, much as it did for Lamb and Carlyle. In "Remembrance and Redemption: A Social Interpretation of War Memorials," Jay Winter argues that the Armistice Day tradition of holding silence "can be understood as secularized prayer" in the

[222] According to the BBC, records also show a period of silence in remembrance of King Edward VII in 1910 ("The Power of Silence," 9 November 2010).

[223] A 2010 article called "The Power of Silence" (BBC, 9 November) posits silence as a means to "rediscover the power of attention" and points to Professor Adam Jaworski's claims that "silence fulfills interpersonal functions…[and] speaks of intimacy, love, and security to people" (n.p.) His further observation, "Good friends can be together and be silent," is reminiscent of Charles Lamb's position on silence. Lucy Noakes claims that Armistice Day's silence "served to link…individuals with the collective" and she casts participation in that shared silence as "a means of participating in the 'social imaginary' of inter-war Britain" (335).

context of interwar Britain (3). Daily moments of silence gained popularity in the United States after the 1962 Supreme Court ruling in *Engel v. Vitale* declared prayer in public schools unconstitutional, a transportation of religious practice into secular spaces (for similar ends) that echoed the co-opting of Quaker silent practices by nineteenth-century authors and urbanites. A subsequent case—*Wallace v. Jaffree*, 1985—would find moments of silence in public schools equally unconstitutional if there was an overt religious purpose behind the exercise, but the tradition lasted well into the 1990s.

The silent moment's conflation of religious and secular life may remain controversial, but it retains its status as the predominant signal of solidarity in Western society. Unifying participants in grief and reflection across countries and even continents during social and cultural tumult, this institutionalized practice of shared silence constitutes "an ingenious blend of public and private, collectively marked and contained, but…placing no limits on what [is] remembered, thought, or felt" (Scutts n.p.).

3 The Ultimate Luxury Good: Post-War Productions of Silence

Much as the social deployment of silence persisted during and beyond World War I, the pursuit and technological production of silent space has maintained its urgency in the two centuries since Lamb published "A Quaker's Meeting." As Swiss philosopher Max Picard lamented in 1948 in a tirade against the "absolute verbal noise" of the radio, "the content hardly matters any longer; the production of noise is the main concern" (198). For Picard, "silence no longer exists as a *world*" in the twentieth century, "but only in fragments, as the remains of a world" (212,

emphasis original). A 2015 article from *The Atlantic* takes up physiological concerns, warning, "gradual loss of hearing from continuous noise is a worldwide problem" (Biguenet n.p.).

It took more than a hundred years for Western nations—and the English lexicon—to acknowledge sound as the urban irritant and pollutant that Victorians such as Carlyle and Babbage knew it to be. The *Oxford English Dictionary* first references "noise pollution" (alternatively called "sound pollution") from the *Britannica Book of the Year* for 1969. Defining this new term as "pollution consisting of annoying noise," the Britannica entry pointed its finger at sonic output from "automobile traffic," "jet airplane[s]," and "vacuum cleaner[s]." With noise's belated designation as an environmental pollutant rather than a nuisance, countries such as Britain and the United States finally began more coordinated attempts to mitigate its harm and long-term effects on their citizens.[224] Beyond the overt noises of modern urban and industrial environments, however, those living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries also contend with "a kind of noise that doesn't register on a sound meter" (Brox n.p.)—an extension of the information frenzy and "outrageous stimulation" that Wordsworth deplored in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.

In "The Luxury of Silence: How Silence Became the Ultimate Luxury Good," John Biguenet writes of silence's commodification in an age when noisemakers such as airlines and automobile corporations "demand[] a premium…to mute" the "racket" they create (n.p.).[225] Artist Marianne

---

[224] The U.S. Noise Control Act of 1972 set an important standard for national sound pollution legislation, establishing sound emission standards for essentially every source of noise. The United Kingdom put their first national noise regulation law into place in 1960, but this piece of legislation was not comprehensive nor easily enforced. Today, sound segregation is a fundamental aspect of urban planning. The World Health Organization has deemed 50 dB the maximum allowable sound level for residential areas.

[225] Biguenet's argument recalls the simultaneous rise of railway travel and earplug patents in the nineteenth-century. He cites airport lounges, Bose's noise-cancelling headphones, and Mercedes's 2014 and 2015 boasts about

Heske affirmed this enduring paradox—technology that serves as both disruptor and producer of silence—in her installation for Norway's pavilion at the Expo 2000: "The Silent Room." Taking the Expo's motto, "Humankind-Nature-Technology," as their starting point, Heske and the rest of Norway's exhibition committee constructed a national pavilion centered on sonic experience. A manmade waterfall formed the noisy outer portal to her Silent Room, which relied on exterior aluminum cladding and "prefabricated, insulated wall sections of laminated wood and plywood" to produce the silence within (Meyer 325-26).

Heske's installation provided an indisputably shared experience of silence for its many visitors, who entered and exited at leisure in a steady flow of human traffic. Designed to give a little piece of Norway to travelers from around the world, this structure "produced, contained, and displayed silence" (323). "Silence," according to Heske, "is a product that Norway is amply supplied with" (329). Grappling with what it meant to "exhibit" silence after her visit to the Silent Room, Morgan Meyer argued that the "most distinctive features of the Norwegian pavilion were a simultaneous presence and absence" (323). The presence of sound outside this silent space highlighted its absence within, while the interlocking presence and absence of technology made the entire experience possible.[226] Technology, after all, must shield us from technological noise.

4 Writing Silence into the Twenty-First Century

"When I speak of silence, I often use it synonymously with quiet. I mean silence from modern life… A quiet place is the think tank of the soul."

noise-cancelling passenger cabins as examples of the "surcharge" modern transportation charges for its own sonic output.

[226] Meyer explains that the silence in this room was "produced by multiple, but co-existent, forms of technological mediation: use and significant non-use and continuous and discontinuous use" (330). She defines "significant non-use" as a "voluntary break…knowing how to use, being able to use but eventually deciding not to use" (330).

— Gordon Hempton

In a March 2020 article for *The Washington Post*, Bilal Qureshi asserts, "The literature of silence is having its moment" (n.p.). He views the rise of this "family of books"[227] as evidence of a "real need — and void — in contemporary life," and defines silence, that sought-after entity, as "the cumulative experience of personal space and a mind at rest, with room to think and contemplate" (n.p.). Writing for *The New Yorker*, Jane Brox characterizes the necessary quiet of her environment as "spacious—a place in which my thoughts can roam as I work" (n.p.). It is a force that connects her to those before her who "also worked in silence" (n.p.). Qureshi's and Brox's words connect an ongoing thirst for silence to that of the nineteenth-century authors and intellectuals who painstakingly carved it out in their narratives and environments.

Sara Maitland's 2010 *A Book of Silence* carries even greater resonance, bringing Victorian writers' exploration of silence as a "positive presence" rather than a "lack" or "absence" into the twenty-first century (27). Following this environmental condition to different parts of the world and building it carefully into her life, she finds—as Lucy Snowe once said—that it is "of different kinds, and breathes different meanings" (Brontë 385). Maitland also pinpoints, much as this dissertation has argued, "something profoundly different between the silence of the hermits and the silence of creative artists" (190). Creatives from Lamb to Eliot not only recognized and concretized an intimate relationship between silence and the social impulse, but also handed it down to later generations. Silence and solitude, they affirmed, were far from inextricable.

[227] Among the books Qureshi cites are *Volume Control* by David Owen, *How to do nothing: resisting the attention economy* by Jenny Odell, and *Digital Minimalism* by Cal Newport.

As popular writing over the past ten years makes clear, humanity is as eager as ever for silence to provide what Dickens, Brontë, and Eliot understood that it could: a safeguarding of mental health, fortification of our interpersonal ties, and a crucial foundation for the human capacity to "exhibit empathy and have deep thoughts" (Akbari n.p.).[228] Qureshi posits silence in the twenty-first century as an "orientation rather than a sonic condition," and calls attention to contemporary writers who "make space to think and consider rather than rattle with the noise of certitude" (n.p.). While modern technology continues to introduce obstacles *and* solutions to the production of silent space, literature perseveres alongside it, proffering its own avenues toward that "delicious quiet" (Eliot n.p.).[229]

[228] Quote from "Saving Silence: Finding Quiet in a Chaotic World" by sociologist Anna Akbari, who also argues that it is in quiet that we are "capable of intimacy, with ourselves and others" (n.p.).
[229] Quote from George Eliot's 22 May 1857 letter to Sara Hennell: "I hope to get up my strength in this delicious quiet, and have fewer interruptions to work from headache."

References

Aaron, Jane. *A Double Singleness: Gender and the Writings of Charles and Mary Lamb*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1991.

Akbari, Anna. "Saving Silence: Finding Quiet in a Chaotic World." *Psychology Today*, 16 November 2017.

Anderson, Amanda. *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Anonymous. "In the Silent City." *All the Year Round* [London, England], 17 May 1873, pp. 61–65.

Anonymous. "On Inferential Reasoning from the Silence of Scripture." *Journal of Sacred Literature*, Vol. 4 (1849), pp. 278.

Anonymous. "Silence in the Gallery!" *Punch* (Date unknown; circa 1840), pp. 2.

Anonymous. "Sound." *All the Year Round*. Vol. 19, No. 461 (Feb. 1868), pp. 255-58.

Anonymous. "The Value of Silence." *The Musical Standard* (26 April 1873), p. 254. [London]

Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 1987.

Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time." *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. William Savage Johnson. Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913.

---. *Matthew Arnold and His Poetry*. Ed. Francis Bickley. London: George G. Harrap & Company, 1911.

---. "The Scholar Gypsy," The Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43606/the-scholar-gipsy.

Ashton, Rosemary. *One Hot Summer: Dickens, Darwin and the Great Stink of 1858*. Yale University Press, 2017.

Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Theory and History of Literature, vol. 16, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985. [1977]

Badowska, Eva. "Choseville: Brontë's Villette and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority." *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (Oct. 2005), pp. 1509-1523.

Bailey, Peter. *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Bass, Michael T. *Street Music in the Metropolis: Correspondence and Observations on the Existing Law, and Proposed Amendments*. London, John Murray, 1864.

Battles, Kelly E. "George Eliot's *Romola*: A Historical Novel Rather Different in Character." *Philological Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2009, pp. 219-235.

Baumgarten, Murray. "Reading Dickens Writing London." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (June 2011), pp. 219-231.

Beck, Warren. "HONORARY FRIEND: Charles Lamb and the Quakers." *Bulletin of Friends Historical Association*, vol. 43, no. 2, 1954, pp. 67–83. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41944551.

Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. London: Belknap Press, 1999.

Berlant, Lauren. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1998), pp. 281-288.

Berridge, Victoria. "Victorian Opium Eating: Responses to Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England." *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1978), pp. 437-461.

Biguenet, John. "The Luxury of Silence: How Silence Became the Ultimate Luxury Good." *The Atlantic*, 3 October 2015.

Bonfiglio, Richard. "Cosmopolitan Realism: Portable Domesticity in Brontë's Belgian Novels." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 40 (2012), pp. 599-616.

Braun, Gretchen. "'A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession': Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *ELH*, Vol. 78, No. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 189-212.

British Patent Office. *Patents for Inventions, Abridgements of Specifications: Cements Etc., 1855-1900*. London: H.M.S.O., year.

---. *Patents for Inventions, Abridgements of Specifications: Buildings Etc., 1855-1876*. London: H.M.S.O., year.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Margaret Smith. Oxford University Press, 2007.

---. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*. Vols. I-II. Ed. Margaret Smith. Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2003.

---. *Villette*. Ed. Helen M. Cooper. Penguin, 2004. [1853]

Brontë, Emily. *Wuthering Heights*. Ed. Richard J. Dunn. W. W. Norton & Company, 2002. [1847]

Brown, Kate. "Catastrophe and the City: Charlotte Brontë as Urban Novelist." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2002, pp. 350-380.

Browning, Dominique. "Far From the Madding Crowd." *The New York Times*, 8 September 2009.

Brox, Jane. "A Social – and Personal – History of Silence." *The New Yorker*, 3 April 2019.

Burnett, John. *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985*. London & New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1986.

Buzard, James. *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels*. Princeton University Press, 2005.

Byatt, A. S., and Ignes Sodre. *Imagining Characters: Six Conversations About Women Writers*. Penguin, 1997.

Byerly, Alison. *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.

Capuano, Peter. "An Objective Aural Relative in *Middlemarch*." *SEL*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2007, pp. 921-941.

Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus*. Edited by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008. [1834]

Carlyle, Thomas, and Jane Welsh Carlyle. The Carlyle Letters Online [CLO]. Edited by Brent E. Kinser. Duke University Press, 2007-2016, www.carlyleletters.org.

"Carlyle's Sneers at Lamb." *The Critic: a Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts*, vol. 143, 25 September 1886, pp. 153-4.

"Charles Lamb." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 66, no. 406, 1849, pp. 133–50.

Clark, Peter. *Dickens's London*. Haus Publishing, 2012.

Cleere, Eileen. *The Sanitary Arts: Aesthetic Culture and the Victorian Cleanliness Campaigns*. Ohio State University Press, 2016.

Cohn, Elisha. "Still Life: Suspended Animation in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 52, No. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 843-860.

Cole, William. "Designs and Description of a Double Door for a Room, so contrived that one Door cannot be opened until the other is quite closed." *Architectural Magazine, and Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, and Furnishing, and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith*. Ed. J. C. Loudon. Vol. 2, No. 19 (May 1835), pp. 400.

Cornwall, Barry. *Charles Lamb: A Memoir*. London, E. Moxon, 1866.

Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. MIT Press, 1999.

Dames, Nicholas. *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction 1810-1870*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

---. *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of Victorian Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Darwin, Charles. *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin, Volume I (of II)*. Edited by Francis Darwin, Project Gutenberg EBook, 1999, www.gutenberg.org/files/2087/2087-h/2087-h.htm. [1887]

Davidoff, Leonore and Catherine Hall. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850.* University of Chicago Press, 1987.

De Quincey, Thomas. *Biographical Essays*. Project Gutenberg EBook, 2004, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6314/pg6314.html. [1848]

Dewey, John. *Psychology*. New York: Harper, 1886.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. New York: Penguin, 1996. [1853]

---. *David Copperfield*. Edited by Radhika Jones, New York, Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003. [1850]

---. *Little Dorrit*. New York: Penguin, 2004. [1857]

---. *The British Academy/The Pilgrim Edition of the Letters of Charles Dickens*. Eds. Graham Storey, Margaret Brown, and Kathleen Tillotson. Vols. 1-12. Oxford University

Press, 2002.

Dickens, Mamie. *My father as I recall him, by Mamie Dickens*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1900.

Dilthey, Wilhelm. *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton University Press, 1989. [1883]

---. *Selected Works*. Ed. Rudolf A Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton University Press, 1985.

Donovan, Julie. "Charlotte Brontë's Renderings of Time." *Time, Space, and Place in Charlotte Brontë*. Eds. Diane Long Hoeveler and Deborah Denenholz Morse. Routledge, 2017.

Durkheim, Emile. *Sociology and Philosophy*. Trans. D. F. Pocock. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1953.

Eagleton, Terry. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Eliot, George. *The Complete Works of George Eliot, Volume VII: Life and Letters* (Vol. II). New York: George D. Sproul, 1899.

---. *The Essays of "George Eliot" Complete*. Ed. Nathan Sheppard. New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883.

---. *George Eliot's Life, as related in her Letters and Journals*. Ed. J. W. Cross. Project Gutenburg eBook Edition, 2013, vols. 1-3.

---. *The Lifted Veil* and *Brother Jacob*. Ed. Helen Small. Oxford University Press, 2009. [1859]

---. *Middlemarch*. Ed. Rosemary Ashton. Penguin Group, 2003. [1871]

---. *The Mill on the Floss*. Penguin, 2003. [1860]

---. *Romola*. Ed. Andrew Brown. Oxford University Press, 1998. [1862]

Esmail, Jennifer. *Reading Victorian Deafness: Signs and Sounds in Victorian Literature and Culture*. Columbus, Ohio University Press, 2013.

Fearon, Francis. "Letters Patent for Improved Apparatus for Softening or Deadening Sound." *Great Seal Patent Office* [London, England], Patent No. 2809, 11 Nov. 1864.

Fechner, Gustav. *Elements of Psychophysics*. Trans.Helmut Adler. New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1966. [1860]

Ferrier, David. *The Functions of the Brain*. London: Smith Elder, 1876.

Flanders, Judith. *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London*. New York, Macmillan, 2014.

Franklin, Caroline. *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-Century Women Novelists and Byronism*. Routledge, 2013.

Frazee, John P. "The Character of Esther and the Narrative Structure of *Bleak House*." *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall 1985), pp. 227-240.

Fyfe, Paul. *By Accident or Design: Writing the Victorian Metropolis.* Oxford University Press, 2015.

Gaskell, Elizabeth Cleghorn. *The Letters of Mrs. Gaskell.* Eds. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard. Mandolin, 1997.

Gaylin, Ann. *Eavesdropping in the Novel from Austen to Proust.* Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Gibson, Anna. "*Our Mutual Friend* and Network Form." *Novel*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2015), pp. 63-84.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2000. [1979]

Glen, Heather. *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

Glenn, Cheryl. *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2004.

Gorman, G. *The Amazing Fact of Quaker Worship*. London, Quaker Home Service, 1979.

Grossman, Jonathan H. *Charles Dickens's Networks: Public Transport and the Novel*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Hadjiafxendi, Kyriaki. "Between Deafness and Sound: Aurality and the Limits of Sympathy in Mill on the Floss." *The George Eliot Review*, vol. 42, 2011.

Hamm, Thomas, editor. *Quaker Writings: An Anthology, 1650-1920*. New York, Penguin Books, 2010.

Haines, Frederick. "Letters Patent for The Deadening of Sound, and the Prevention of Vibration and Concussion in Connection with Machinery, Gun and Mortar Boats, and General Ordnance, and Other Purposes." *Great Seal Patent Office* [London, England], Patent No. 14, 3 Jan. 1856.

Hardy, Thomas. "'And there was a great calm': On the signing of the armistice, November 11, 1918." *World War One British Poets: Brooke, Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, and Others*, Dover Publications, 1997, pp. 57-58.

Hawkins. "Lecture on 'Silence.'" *The Hull Packet and East Riding Times* [Hull, East Yorkshire, England], 4 Dec. 1857, p. n.p.

Hayward, Helen. *Never Marry a Girl with a Dead Father: Women's Troubled Relationships in Realist Novels*. London: I. B. Tauris, 1999.

Hegel, Frederich. *Philosophy of Mind*. Trans. William Wallace. Oxford University Press, 1971. [1817]

von Helmholtz, Hermann. *Treatise on Physiological Optics*. Ed. James P. C. Southall. New York: Dover, 1962. Vol. 3.

Herbert, Christopher. *The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to Dracula*. University of Virginia Press, 2019.

Hildebrand, Rebecca Jayne. "*Middlemarch's* Medium: Description, Sympathy, and Realism's Ambient Worlds." *ELH,* vol. 85, no. 4, Winter 2018, pp. 999-1023.

Holme, Thea. *The Carlyles at Home*. London, Persephone Books, 1965.

"How to Build a House and Live in It." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 59, no. 368, 1846, pp. 758–65.

Huguet, Christine, and Paul Vita, eds. *Unsettling Dickens: Process, Progress, and Change*. Wimereux: Sagittaire, 2016.

Huguet, Christine, and Nathalie Vanfasse, eds. *Charles Dickens, Modernism, Modernity*. Wimereux: Sagittaire, 2014.

James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1918. Vol 1. [1890]

Jewusiak, Jacob. "Large-Scale Sympathy and Simultaneity in George Eliot's *Romola*." *SEL*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2014, pp. 853-874.

Jokirana, Miyuki. "The little-known origin of the minute's silence." *ABC Radio National*, 8 November 2018.

Jordan, John O. *Supposing Bleak House*. University of Virginia Press, 2011.

---. “Urban Initiations: Arriving in Dickens’s London.” Humanities West Conference on “Dickens’s London: Heart of Victorian Britain” (San Francisco).

Kennedy, Meegan. “A true prophet? Speculation in Victorian sensory physiology and George Eliot’s ‘The Lifted Veil’.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 71, no. 3, 2016, pp. 369-403.

Kent, I. J. “The Dwelling Rooms of a House: The Dining Room.” *Architectural Magazine, and Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, and Furnishing, and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith*. Ed. J. C. Loudon. Vol. 2, No. 19 (May 1835), pp. 228-33.

---. “On the Dwelling-Rooms of a House, continued.” *Architectural Magazine, and Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, and Furnishing, and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith*. Ed. J. C. Loudon. Vol. 2, No. 20 (June 1835), pp. 276.

Kerr, Robert. *The Gentleman’s House; Or, How to Plan English Residences, From the Parsonage to the Palace; with tables of accommodation, and cost, and a series of selected plans*. London: John Murray, 1864.

Kierkegaard, Søren. *For Self-Examination and Judge for Yourselves!* Project MUSE, Princeton University Press, 2019, muse.jhu.edu/book/65190. [1851]

Kim, Katherine J. “Corpse Hoarding: Control and the Female Body in ‘Bluebeard,’ ‘Schalken the Painter,’ and *Villette*.” *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec. 22, 2011), pp. 1-10.

Koehler, Karin. “Immaterial Correspondence: Letters, Bodies and Desire in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*.” *The Journal of the Brontë Society*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2018), pp. 136-146.

Kreilkamp, Ivan. *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Lamb, Charles. “‘A Chapter on Ears.’” *The Musical World*, vol. 16, no. 279, 1841, pp. 66–69. [Originally published 1821 in *London Magazine*]

---. *The Best Letters of Charles Lamb*. Edited by Edward Johnson, Project Gutenberg EBook, 2003, www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10125/pg10125.html.

---. *Selected Prose*. Edited by Adam Phillips, London, Penguin Classics, 1985.

---. “The Londoner.” *The Reflector*, 1802. *Quotidiana*, essays.quotidiana.org/lamb/londoner.

Lehan, Richard. *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*. University of California Press, 1998.

Levenson, Karen Chase. “‘Happiness is not a potato’: The Victorian Cultivation of Happiness.”

Nineteenth-Century Contexts, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2011), pp. 161-169.

Levin, Amy. "Silence, Gesture, and Meaning in *Middlemarch*." *George Eliot - George Henry Lewes Studies*, no. 30/31, 1996, pp. 20-31.

Levine, Caroline. "Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (2009), pp. 517-523.

Levy, Anita. "Public Space, Private Eyes: Gender and the Social Work of Aesthetics in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2000), pp. 391-416.

Lippard, Paula. "The Rhetoric of Silence: The Society of Friends' Unprogrammed Meeting for Worship." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1988, pp. 145–56, doi:10.1080/01463378809369715.

Macaskill, Hilary. *Charles Dickens at Home*. Frances Lincoln Limited, 2011.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *Silence: A Christian History*. London, Penguin Books, 2013.

MacDuffie, Allen. *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Maitland, Sara. *A Book of Silence*. Granta, 2008.

Marcus, Sharon. *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London*. University of California Press, 1999.

Mathieson, Charlotte. "'A Still Ecstasy of Freedom and Enjoyment': Walking the City in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2017), pp. 521-535.

May, Leila Silvana. *Secrecy and Disclosure in Victorian Fiction*. Routledge, 2016.

Mayer, Nancy. "Evasive Subjects: Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe." *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2013), pp. 74-94.

Mayhew, Henry. *The Great World of London (Part IX)*. London, David Bogue, 1856.

Mayo, Isabella Fyvie. "Thomas Carlyle." *The Leisure Hour*, Nov. 1895, pp. 15–21.

McKee, Patricia. *Reading Constellations: Urban Modernity in Victorian Fiction*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

McNees, Eleanor, ed. *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments (The Helm Information Critical*

Assessment of Writers in English). Vol. I. Routledge, 1997.

---. *The Brontë Sisters: Critical Assessments (The Helm Information Critical Assessment of Writers in English)*. Vol. III. Routledge, 1997.

Melville, Herman. *Pierre: Or, The Ambiguities*. Edited by William Spengemann, London, Penguin Classics, 1996. [1852]

Menke, Richard. *Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems*. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2008.

Metz, Nancy. "Dickens in 1842: Coming to His Senses About America." *English: Journal of the English Association*, Vol. 63, No. 241 (Summer 2014), pp. 97-114.

Meyer, Morgan. "A space for silence: exhibiting and materialising silence through technology." *cultural geographies*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2016, pp. 321-336.

Milnes, Tim. "Charles Lamb: Professor of Indifference." *Philosophy and Literature,* vol. 28, no. 2, 2004, pp. 324–41. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/phl.2004.0033.

Monsman, Gerald. *Confessions of a Prosaic Dreamer: Charles Lamb's Art of Autobiography*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1984.

Moore, Ben. "'When I went to Lunnon town sirs': Transformation and the Threshold in the Dickensian City." *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 2012), pp. 336-349.

Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

Moxon, Edward. "Charles Lamb." *Leigh Hunt's London Journal*, vol. 47, 1835, pp. 50–51.

Murail, Estelle. "A Body Passes By: the Flâneur and the Senses in Nineteenth-Century London and Paris." *The Senses and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2017), pp. 162-176.

Murail, Estelle, and Sara Thornton, eds. *Dickens and the Virtual City: Urban Perception and the Production of Social Space*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Nightingale, Florence. *Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not*. New York, D. Appleton and Company, 1860.

Noakes L. "A broken silence? Mass Observation, Armistice Day and 'everyday life' in Britain 1937–1941." *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2015, pp. 331-346.

Nordau, Max. *Degeneration*. New York: Appleton (1895). [1892]

Nussey, Ellen. “Reminiscences of Charlotte Brontë by a Schoolfellow.” *Scribner’s Monthly* (1871).

Ormond, Leonée. “*Romola*’s Artists.” *The George Eliot Review*, vol. 44, 2013, pp. 16-23.

Otis, Laura. *Networking: Communicating with Bodies and Machines in the Nineteenth Century*. Detroit, University of Michigan Press, 2001.

O’Toole, Sean. *Habit in the English Novel, 1850-1900: lived environments, practices of the self*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Ousby, Ian. “The Broken Glass: Vision and Comprehension in Bleak House.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Vol. 29, No. 4 (Mar. 1975), pp. 381-92.

Palmer, Alan. “Intermental Thought in the Novel: The Middlemarch Mind.” *Style*, vol 39, no 4, 2005.

Parr, Joy. “Notes for a More Sensuous History of Twentieth-Century Canada: The Timely, the Tacit, and the Material Body.” *The Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2001, pp. 719–45. *Project Muse*, muse.jhu.edu/article/590801/summary.

Pater, Walter. *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*. Edited by Alfred Drake, Project Gutenberg EBook, 2001, www.gutenberg.org/files/4037/4037-h/4037-h.htm.

Penn, William. *No Cross, No Crown*. 8th ed., Leeds, 1743.

Pennington, Heidi. *Creating Identity in the Victorian Fictional Autobiography*. University of Missouri Press, 2018.

Phillips, Richard. *Concise Remarks on Watchfulness and Silence*. London: W. Phillips, 1809.

Picard, Max. *The World of Silence*. H. Regnery, 1952.

Picker, John M. *Victorian Soundscapes.* New York, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Piehler, Liana F. *Spatial Dynamics and Female Development in Victorian Art and Novels: Creating a Woman’s Space*. New York: P. Lang, 2003.

Pike, Judith E. “Disability in Charlotte Brontë’s Early Novellas, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*: The Legacy of Finic’s Disabled and Racialized Body.” *The Journal of the Brontë Society*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2018), pp.114-124.

Plan of the late Marshalsea Prison in the Borough of Southwark: Freehold for Sale by Messrs. Driver. London: J. Shuttleworth, 1843.

Poe, Edgar Allan. “Silence—A Sonnet.” *Philadelphia Saturday Courier* (January 4, 1840).

Pond, Kristen. “The Ethics of Silence in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Sept. 22, 2017), pp. 1-11.

Qureshi, Bilal. “In a noisy world, books about silence are booming.” *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2020.

Ralph, Barnaby, et al., eds. *London and Literature, 1603-1901*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017.

Reiman, Donald. “Thematic Unity in Lamb’s Familiar Essays.” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, vol. 64, no. 3, 1965, pp. 470–78. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27714683.

Rein, Frederick. “Letters Patent for An Improved Apparatus by the Use of Which Any Sound Will Become Inaudible to the Wearer.” *Great Seal Patent Office* [London, England], Patent No. 3000, 1 Dec. 1864.

Report from the Commissioners Appointed to inquire into the state, conduct, and management of the Prison and Gaol of The Fleet; and also, of the Prison and Gaol of the Court of His Majesty’s Place at Westminster; and of the Court of the Marshalsea of His Majesty’s honourable Household; and of the Prisoners in the said respective Prisons confined. Royal Commission on Fleet and Marshalsea Prisons. London: H.M.S.O., 1819 [1818]

Rosenthal, Jesse. “The Untrusted Medium: Open Networks, Secret Writing, and *Little Dorrit*.” *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Winter 2017), pp. 288-313.

Ryder, Molly. “Building the Brain: The Architectural Interior in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.” *Victoriographies*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2017, pp. 224-238.

Salotto, Eleanor. “Detecting Esther Summerson’s Secrets: Dickens’s Bleak House of Representation.” *Victorian Literature and Culture,* Vol. 25, No. 2 (1997), pp. 333-349.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation.* Trans. E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover (1966), vol. 2. [1844]

Scott, Walter. *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*. Edited by Henry Morley, London, CASSELL & COMPANY, Limited, 1888. *Project Gutenberg Ebook*, www.gutenberg.org/files/4010/4010-h/4010-h.htm. [1805]

Schafer, R. Murray. *The Tuning of the World*. New York: Knopf, 1977. Reprinted as *The*

Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World. Rochester: Destiny, 1994.

Schlauraff, Kristie A. "Victorian gothic soundscapes." *Literature Compass*, Vol. 15 (2018), pp. 1-11.

Scutts, Joanna. "The Day Europe Fell Silent." *The Atlantic*, 12 November 2018.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. Routledge, 1986.

Shears, Jonathon, and Jen Harrison. "The Ideas in Thing Town: *Villette*, Art and Movable Objects." *Literary Bric-a-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities*. Eds. Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison. Routledge, 2013.

Shuttleworth, Sally. *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Smith, Mark. "Sound Matters: An Essay on Method." *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

---. *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008.

"Sociable Silence." *Once A Week* [London, England], 25 Apr. 1868, pp. 369–72.

Sterne, Jonathan. *The Audible Past*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2003.

Tambling, Jeremy, ed. *Dickens and the City*. Routledge, 2012.

---. *Dickens' Novels as Poetry: Allegory and Literature of the City*. Routledge, 2014.

Tange, Andrea. *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature and the Victorian Middle Classes*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010.

Taylor, Jesse. *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*. The University of Virginia Press, 2016.

"The Power of Silence." *BBC News*, 9 November 2010.

"The Value of Silence." *The Musical Standard* [London, England], 26 Apr. 1873, pp. 254–55.

Thoms, Peter. "'The Narrow Track of Blood': Detection and Storytelling in Bleak House." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Sep., 1995), pp. 147-167.

Torgerson, Beth. *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Vincent, David. *I Hope I Don't Intrude: Privacy and its Dilemmas in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

---. *Privacy: A Short History*. Hoboken, Wiley, 2016.

Webley, Kayla. "A Brief History of the Moment of Silence." *Time Magazine*, 10 January 2011.

Wein, Toni. "Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*." *The Brontës*. Ed. Patricia Ingham. Routledge, 2014.

White, Jerry. *Mansions of Misery: A Biography of the Marshalsea Debtors' Prison*. Penguin Random House UK, 2016.

Wilt, Judith. "Confusion and Consciousness in Dickens's Esther." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Dec., 1977), pp. 285-309.

Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Winter, Jay. "Remembrance and Redemption: A Social Interpretation of War Memorials." *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall 1999, pp. 71-77.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Routledge, 1990. [1921]

Wolfreys, Julian. *Dickens's London: Perception, Subjectivity and Phenomenal Urban Multiplicity*. Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Harcourt, 1981. [1927]

Wordsworth, William. "On the Power of Sound," *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*. Edited by Thomas Hutchinson and Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1936. [1828]

Young, Kay. "*Middlemarch* and the Problem of Other Minds Heard." *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2003, pp. 223-241.

Zigarovich, Jolene. *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.