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The Dickens tape: affect and sound reproduction in The Chimes

JAY CLAYTON

WHAT WOULD YOU GIVE for a recording of Dickens reading? Who would not treasure a scrap of the Inimitable's voice? Dickens himself wanted people to hear him. He revelled in public readings where his voice brought to life Micawber and Pickwick, the death of Little Nell and the hanging of Sikes. Recordings of other nineteenth-century voices exist – Tennyson, Browning and Whitman, among writers – and the tenuous thread of their words reaches toward us as from another world. The crackle of static is like the noise of time itself. Dickens, who was interested in sound technology, would have been one of the first in line to bury his head in a speaking trumpet and bellow, 'I never will desert Mr Micawber'. But, unless Charles Babbage is right and sound waves leave permanent impressions on the air, we shall never hear the departed voice of one of the pioneers of public readings.¹ Dickens died seven years before the invention of the phonograph, and the sound of his speech has been lost for ever.

Visual recordings of Dickens abound. The novelist lived to see the development of several different forms of photography, and there are memorable drawings, paintings and photographs of the author. In fact, no writer has ever dwelled in a world devoid of visual representation. But until the late nineteenth century, sound was rarely thought of as a suitable medium for recording. There were oral formulaic poets, traditional storytellers, classically trained rhetoricians and actors, who could use

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¹ See Babbage 108.

Attending to sound reproduction as a separate process from recording, however, yields different conclusions. Nineteenth-century communication technologies such as the telegraph and telephone, which reproduced without storing information, appeared to their first auditors to intensify sensory effects, producing embodied rather than abstracted forms of experience. Third, this embodied sensory experience prompts us to attend to the distinctive kinds of affect Dickens and other nineteenth-century authors attributed to sound reproduction. As a sensory phenomenon that causes affective responses in a listener, sound seems like an ideal test case for the ideas emerging in the field of affect studies.

Over the last decade, affect studies have become an important topic in literary and cultural criticism, in part because they provide an opportunity to engage social and material conditions without sacrificing the lessons of deconstruction. After the 'end of theory' (proclaimed and denied in a series of volumes published around the turn of the century),³ affect studies became one of the places where theory migrated. Affect theory allows critics to attend to emotional states without reinstating a feeling subject, for affect is defined in terms of bodily intensities that are not easily translated into particular meanings or intentions. In this respect, it has affinities with other critical enterprises that attempt to decentre the humanist subject, such as animal studies and 'thing theory' (Brown). Among the senses, sound and scent are especially prone to cause affective responses untethered to the desires of the individual. Building on a distinction common in experimental psychology, literary theorists generally define *affect* as the bodily or physiological dimension of feelings and use the word *emotion* for more psychological aspects. Lawrence Grossberg inaugurated this line of thinking in cultural studies, writing 'unlike emotions, affective states are neither structured narratively nor organised in response to our interpretations of situations' (81). Rei Terada relies on much the same distinction: 'by *emotion* we usually

letter in the moment' of writing and thus disrupts the 'continuous transition from nature to culture' (194-5) is the *locus classicus* of this idea for many subsequent critics. Prominent critics who follow Kirtler in emphasising the abstraction and disembodiment brought about by information technology include Cray and Seltzer. For a counterview, see my discussion (2003: 65-70) of the way that Kirtler's emphasis on media that record rather than communicate information results in a fundamental misconception of the relationship of technology to the senses.

³ Butler, Guillory and Thomas; Eagleton; Mitchell; and Elliott.

remembered words as records of the past. The memory theatre and other mnemonic tricks could become technologies for sound reproduction of a sort - technologies of the self, which disciplined the mind to recall streams of data for oral recitation. That said, sound was not a medium of choice for recording, despite the paradoxical fact that sound was often believed to trigger memories more powerfully even than sight. Sound shared with memory a transitory, evanescent quality, which would soon give the first phonographic recordings some of their power to haunt. Until Edison's wax cylinders changed everything, sound was primarily a medium for communication, not for the preservation of the past.

In the absence of recordings, we must take the measure of Dickens's voice in other terms, find a different kind of tape to tie up the bundle of meanings and memories that sounds in his texts evoke. Different forms of sound reproduction were common before the age of recording. Jonathan Sterne, one of the few scholars of nineteenth-century sound, makes this point: 'One could argue that ancient uses of animal horns to amplify the voice and aid the hard-of-hearing are, in a certain sense, sound-reproduction technologies' (19). Although Sterne goes on to define 'sound reproduction' in more specialised terms, he is right to point out that nineteenth-century speaking automata, for example, or music boxes and player-pianos, could be counted as forms of sound reproduction. To these, I would add Dickens's many barrel organs, bells, clock chimes, train and factory whistles, theatrical sound effects, telegraph sounders, and more. If one stretches out the tape to take the measure of these early sound-reproduction technologies, what does one discover about acoustic experience in the nineteenth century?

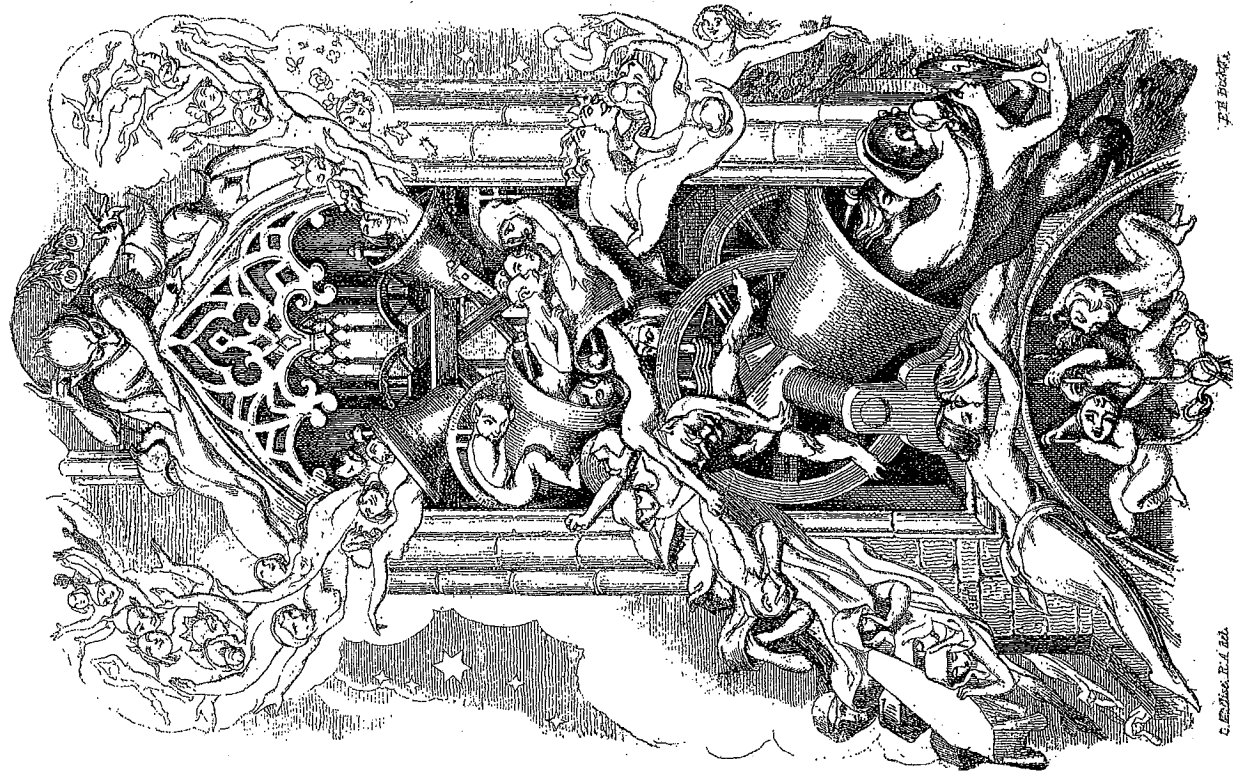
First, one defamiliarises the concept of *reproduction*. Each time a bell rings or train whistle blows, it produces a characteristic sound, reproducing it only in the sense of repeating it. Prior to recording technology, this kind of reproduction was one of the main ways in which remembered sounds could be heard again. Every performance of the sound was a singular event, even if the auditory experience evoked all the sensory effects and emotional resonances of its previous iterations. Second, instruments that reproduce sound without storing acoustic data challenge a key dogma of contemporary media studies, the belief that information technology contributes to the abstraction and disembodiment of modern experience.²

² Friedrich Kirtler's discussion of the typewriter, which 'unlinks hand, eye, and

mean a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect is *affect*' (4). Brian Massumi and Sianne Ngai both oppose the subjective character of emotion to the objective existence of affect, since the latter is something that can be perceived as an 'intensity' even when its meaning is vague (Massumi 27) and is 'as fundamentally "social" as the institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism' (Ngai 25). For example, Ngai's interest in 'dysphoric feelings' such as anxiety or paranoia, which produce 'situations of suspended agency' (1), illustrates how the social character of affects may stem from their decentring of the individual will. Affect, then, indicates comparatively unstructured, non-narrative and free-floating bodily intensities, unmoored to the subject's desires and intentions.

Dickens dramatises the power of sounds to provoke emotion throughout his career, but he is just as sensitive to the affect of sounds. His fiction frequently registers the physical impact of sounds – not just on the ears, but on the body and the mind of listeners too. Given the noisy urban environment of much of his fiction, this is hardly surprising. Bells, though, occupy a special place in Dickens's auditory world. Dickens published an article on bells in *All the Year Round* (19 January 1867), and church bells toll throughout Dickens's fiction – notably in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), where Little Nell hears the village bell 'almost as a living voice' (657), and in his second Christmas book, *The Chimes* (1844), where the entire tale revolves around 'the Spirits of the Bells'. This latter work develops a powerful account of the confused affective response caused by the sound of pealing bells.

The Chimes features an old man named Toby Veck (called 'Trotty' by most acquaintances), who tirelessly and cheerfully works for subsistence wages as a courier for the rare customer who asks him to carry a small package or message. One night, after several encounters with rich, self-important men who label Toby and his daughter Meg as surplus population and prove to them through the unimpeachable precepts of political economy that Meg should never marry and Toby should cease to exist, the old man falls asleep and has a series of disturbing dreams. In these dreams he climbs to the top of the neighbouring church tower, where hang the bells that have been his only source of encouragement through many a long year. There he has a series of visions of what the future entails if the political economists are correct.



THE TOWER OF THE CHIMES.

Figure 1.1 'The Tower of the Chimes'

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As a sound-reproduction technology, a bell might seem like a one-note affair. But a bell does have the capacity to reproduce a sound for years on end and hence to speak to a listener of vanished days. Moreover, a church bell is an impressive piece of technology, involving metal-casting, acoustic expertise, a rope, tower, beam and pivot. Schiller's immensely popular poem 'The Song of the Bell', which may have been a source for *The Chimes*,⁴ alternates passages recounting the arduous process of forging a bell with the sweet and sublime impressions of its peal:

Now with potash permeating,
 Let us hasten quick the cast.
 And from lather free
 Must the mixture be,
 That from metal pure abounding
 Pure and full the voice be sounding.
 (Schiller, lines 43-8)

In Dickens's tale, Toby's bells have a more articulate voice than any I have ever heard. They speak to Toby continuously, explaining things, telling him what to do, reminding him of his past, and exhorting him for the future. 'Many's the kind things they say to me', Toby tells his daughter; 'how often have I heard them bells say, "Toby Veck, Toby Veck, keep a good heart, Toby!"' (161-2). These bells are full of wisdom and good cheer, the most articulate and verbose sound technology one could ever want. The bells

were company to him; and when he heard their voices, he had an interest in glancing at their lodging-place, and thinking how they were moved, and what hammers beat upon them. Perhaps he was the more curious about these Bells, because there were points of resemblance between themselves and him. They hung there, in all weathers: with the wind and rain driving in upon them: facing only the outsides of all those houses; never getting any nearer to the blazing fires that gleamed and shone upon the windows, or came puffing out of the chimney tops; and incapable of participation in any of the good things that were constantly being handed, through the street doors and the area railings, to prodigious cooks. (155)

⁴ See Slater (1970: 526). An anonymous review of *The Chimes*, in the *Christian Remembrancer* in 1845, remarks, 'the influence of the chimes, and the leading idea of the story, is taken from Schiller's Song of the Bell' ([Anon.] 164).

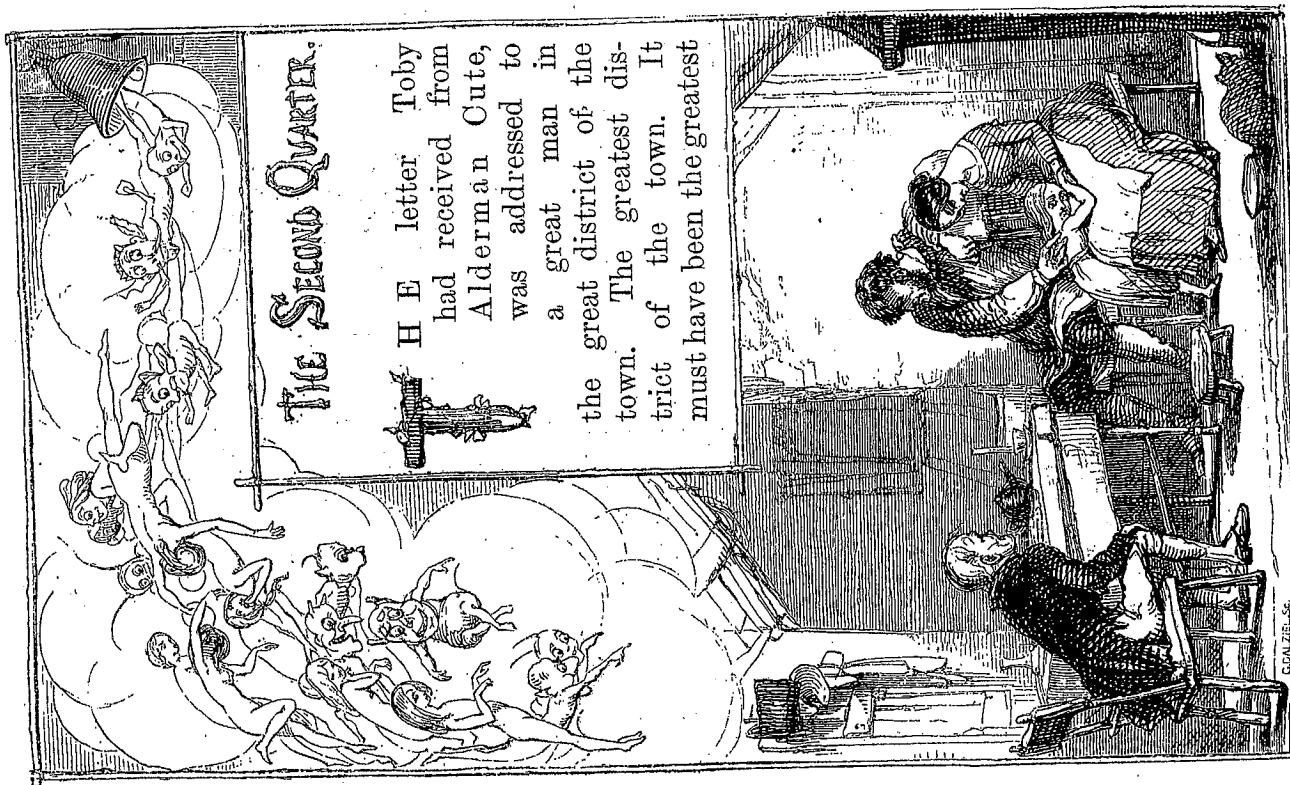


Figure 1.2 'The Second Quarter'

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We recognise the distinctive Dickens note in a passage such as this one – the poor and overlooked denizen of the streets, gazing at the warmth and food and finery that he will never enjoy, yet not repining. These are the emotions readers have always counted on Dickens to furnish, the feelings we especially associate with his early fiction and his Christmas stories. If such palpable tugging on readers' heartstrings no longer appeals today, there can be no doubt of its power in Dickens's time. The author personally witnessed the extraordinary effect of *The Chimes* when he read it out loud in what has been identified as his first public reading to a group outside his home (Andrews 128). Dickens's friend John Forster gathered a circle of the author's friends to hear him read from the manuscript of *The Chimes* in early December 1844, shortly before it was published. The dozen or so grown men who listened alternated between laughter and sobbing. The artist Daniel Maclise was so impressed that he drew a pencil sketch of the event that captures the auditors' intense emotions.⁵ Maclise wrote to Dickens's wife, 'there was not a dry eye in the house . . . shrieks of laughter – there were indeed – and floods of tears as a relief to them – I do not think there ever was such a triumphant hour for Charles' (*Letters*, IV: 235, n. 6). Dickens added in his own letter: 'If you had seen Macready last night, undisguisedly sobbing, and crying on the sofa as I read, you would have felt (as I did) what a thing it is to have power' (Dickens 1977: 235).

Dickens used this power to capture the personal associations that the bells had for Toby Veck and to translate those associations into emotion. The personal, however, is augmented by the public associations that a bell can evoke. For centuries, the sound of church bells has been integral to complex social networks: systems of time-keeping, religion, mourning, marriage, community relations, national holidays, civic honours and emergencies. The historian Alain Corbin charts the persistence of the communal role of bells from medieval times all the way up to the end of the nineteenth century. Corbin describes how the 'impact of a bell helped create a territorial identity' for those who lived in range of its sound, an 'auditory space that corresponded to a particular notion of territoriality, one obsessed with mutual acquaintance' (184). The sense of 'an enclosed space structured by the sound emanating from its center' (184) was crucial to the communal associations of bells. 'Bells shaped the habitus of a community or, if you will, its culture of the senses. They served to anchor

5 For a reproduction of Maclise's drawing, see Cohen 168.

localism, imparting depth to the desire for rootedness and offering the peace of near, well-defined horizons' (185). Corbin's history focuses on villages and small townships, but he insists that much of what he says applies to bell towers dotting the cityscape of Paris in the nineteenth century. We know that Dickens felt this way too from his repeated references to the insular Cockney world bounded by the sound of Bow Bells. Toby certainly looks to his bells for a sense of safety and daily reassurance that, even in his infirm old age, he is a valued contributor to his community.

Such are the inarticulate feelings the bells initially convey. They are a part of Toby's *habitus*, the most crucial part, and Dickens is keenly aware that they play this role in Toby's life without his being able to interpret all these vague feelings to himself, to give them a name or identify them clearly. The bells produce the *affect* of belonging, not more crisply defined emotions. Here we see the first glimmering of why affect theory can be of use to our reading of Dickens – it enables us to distinguish two ways sound operates in Dickens, two forms of acoustic feeling in *The Chimes*, and elsewhere in the author's work. One is direct, emotional – we encounter it most clearly in passages where the author's moral or instructive tendencies come to the fore. Sentimental passages, didactic rhetoric, overt satire, and melodramatic moments often exhibit a direct appeal to readers' emotions. The other is more diffuse, affective – we find it most often in the author's resonant world-building, his magical powers to bring the entire environment of a story to life. Only rarely, as in *The Chimes*, do we see the novelist attempt to represent affect, as opposed to emotion, in dramatic scenes directly. The rarity of such direct assaults on unstructured, non-narrative feelings is perhaps for the best, but it is worth observing that they occur with frequency in the author's Christmas tales. In his second Christmas story, Dickens tries to let personification carry the burden of affect – tries, and I am afraid, fails for most readers today. The allegorical personifications of the chimes as goblin Spirits of the Bells strike an odd note, but the oddity becomes more explicable when one grasps them as the author's straining after indefinable affects.

Dickens points directly to the indefinable character of the bells' affect. 'I don't mean to say that when [Toby] began to take to the Bells, and to knit up his first rough acquaintance with them into something of a closer and more delicate woof, he passed through these considerations one by one, or held any formal review or great field-day in his thoughts' (155). Instead of conscious meanings, the bells produce bodily sensations of belonging.

Dickens almost seems to spell out the distinction central to today's affect theory when he contrasts Toby's inability to 'hold any formal review' of his thoughts about the bells with his physical response to their sound:

But what I mean to say, and do say is, that as the functions of Toby's body, his digestive organs for example, did of their own cunning, and by a great many operations of which he was altogether ignorant, and the knowledge of which would have astonished him very much, arrive at a certain end; so his mental faculties, without his privity or concurrence, set all these wheels and springs in motion, with a thousand others, when they worked to bring about his liking for the Bells. (155-6)

For Dickens, as for recent literary theorists, affect operates physiologically – it alters the very autonomic nervous system of the body, from the digestive organs to other preconscious mental faculties. As Dickens puts it later in the story, Toby understood such things 'not as a reflection but a bodily sensation' (203).

Dickens seems aware of the importance to affect of the somatic dimension of sound. For those who know how capacious Dickens's curiosity was about all manner of technologies and practices, it will come as no surprise that the novelist knew something about the acoustic theory of the day.⁶ John Picker (2003) has written the best account to date of Dickens's interest in contemporary theories of sound and sound technology, from the novelist's eager response to acoustic research in the 1830s to the chapter titled 'What the Waves were Always Saying' in *Dombey and Son* (1846-8) to the 'astonishing' powers of auscultation exhibited by Durdles the stonemason in Dickens's last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Picker highlights Dickens's response to a passage in Charles Babbage's *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise* (1837) on the permanence of sound waves, which the novelist twice alludes to in later decades. Babbage maintained that

The air itself is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said or woman whispered. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as with the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the united movements of each particle, the testimony of man's changeable will. (Babbage 112)

⁶ I discuss Dickens's relationship with two prominent acoustical theorists, Wheatstone and Babbage, in 'The Voice in the Machine' (1997) and 'Hacking the Nineteenth Century' (2000) respectively.

In *Dombey and Son* Dickens mentions the 'speculation of an ingenious modern philosopher' (Babbage), that the 'vibration' of 'a sound in air . . . may go on travelling for ever through the interminable fields of space' (quoted in Picker 17).

Dickens knew about acoustic wave theory not just from Babbage but from his acquaintance with Wheatstone. The two probably first met in the early 1840s at a dinner given by the actor William Macready; Dickens refers to Wheatstone in his letters as a friend of Miss Burdett-Coutts; and Dickens may have also known him through George Cruikshank, who was a good friend of the scientist. Sir Charles Wheatstone, who invented the telegraph in the same year as Samuel Morse, began his research career by investigating the properties of acoustic waves. At the age of nineteen, he created a stir in London by exhibiting a musical toy called the 'Enchanted Lyre', in which a replica of an ancient lyre was hung from the ceiling by a thin cord and was made to play tunes for hours on end without any apparent human intervention. This stunt turned out to be a scientific demonstration of the ability of sound waves to travel more efficiently through solids than air. The lyre was connected to the sounding board of a piano in a room above, and the notes propagated down through the wire were reproduced on the strings, but the sound of the piano did not reach the audience's ears through the air. In Wheatstone's publication of his results in 1823, he emphasised that sound waves produced sympathetic vibrations on the strings of the lyre and thus onward to the ears of the listener through physical contact. One vibrating membrane 'communicated' its motion to another via a physical medium, whether wire or air.

Wheatstone's best-known acoustic instrument was a device he named the 'Kaleidophone'. In Wheatstone's 1827 paper on this 'new Philosophical Toy', he explains that if the rods are plucked or tapped with a hammer, the bead on the top will describe elaborate but regular patterns, which vary depending on the angle of vibration. This instrument, like his later wave machine, helped demonstrate the physical presence of sound waves not merely as static patterns but as motion. Wheatstone's experiments also suggested that the motion of the 'vibrating particles' was more complex than researchers had guessed, something Wheatstone confirmed six years later by developing the mathematical formula for the famous patterns created by sound waves on Chladni plates.⁷ Historians of science have

⁷ For an account of the research of Ernst Chladni, the Father of Acoustics, see

focused on Wheatstone's efforts to make sound visible, and hence, to 'write' sound. But his acoustic experiments actually had a double impulse: (1) to make the feeling of sound accessible through as many senses as possible and (2) to explain the sensory effects of sound mathematically. In both of these ambitions, he sought ways to make apparent the material or embodied presence of the sound wave.

Wheatstone and Babbage's findings challenge the tendency in contemporary media studies to regard information technology as inevitably leading to the disassociation of the senses. Following Friedrich Kittler, critics often assert that technological mediation abstracts the subject, dislocating the senses. According to this line of thinking, reproduced sounds divide the original from its copy, detaching sounds from the context of their utterance. Kittler's point, however, applies more to recording technology, which stores sound for later playback, than to communication technology, which transmits sound from one point to another. Of course, all communication devices such as the telegraph store data (however briefly) in the process of communicating, and recording technologies such as the phonograph communicate as well as store information. But attending to sound reproduction in itself, as a theoretically separate process from sound recording, would alter current approaches to the history of nineteenth-century soundscapes. The imposition of a recording paradigm on all forms of sound technology results in an overemphasis on sound as a form of inscription or writing, with all the modern problems of abstraction and dislocation which that entails, rather than as a form of embodied experience. Jonathan Sterne's research in this area brings him to a similar conclusion. Sterne notes that the tendency to 'fetishize sound recording over other forms of sound reproduction' is what makes many critics emphasise a 'certain disembodiment of sound' (50).

In the first sound-recording device, Edison's phonograph (1877), the function of data storage is paramount, just as it was in many nineteenth-century visual technologies: the typewriter, teletype and early cinema. Edison's device did seem to produce an eerie sense of disassociation.

Sterne (43-5). Chladni demonstrated that sound impinges on matter in physical ways, forming reproducible patterns that can be seen with the eye, under certain circumstances, and preserved in drawings. The vibrations produced beautiful patterns, which have come to be known as 'Chladni figures'. Chladni toured Europe, delighting audiences in lecture halls by producing his figures in sand by drawing a violin bow across a metal plate.

Ivan Kreilkamp has shown how Edison's phonograph provoked uncanny responses in listeners. Hearing a 'human voice re-articulated again and again by a machine' could have the paradoxical effect of seeming to alienate the words from the person who spoke them: they became 'autonomous, detached phonemes, fragments of sound waves given material form on a tape or phonograph cylinder' (Kreilkamp 213, 217). The alienation, however, should be seen as a distinctive feature of recording technology's capacity to store sound, to preserve it as in a wax museum – or rather, wax cylinder. Hence the uncanny effect Kreilkamp notes. Eric Ames observes, 'The late-nineteenth-century discourse on the phonograph revolved around the medium's claim to give voice to the dead' (311). Ames quotes Edison's prediction that 'For the purpose of preserving the sayings, the voices, and the *last words* of the dying member of a family – as of great men – the phonograph will unquestionably outrank the photograph' (Edison 533-54, italics in original; quoted in Ames 312).

One might be tempted to recuperate the affective difference between recording and communication technologies in terms of periodisation, identifying the sense of dislocation produced by Edison's machine with modernity, but that would oversimplify the issues. Nineteenth-century communications such as the telegraph and telephone persisted into the twentieth century, side by side with the recording technologies that Kittler studies. The former devices reinforced rather than severed the connection between signs and the senses. The physical impact of sound and touch in the telegraph's operation contrasts with the disembodiment often identified with the modern encounter with information (Clayton 1997). By consolidating the sensory properties of the signal, communication technologies appeared to intensify rather than abstract. Steven Connor emphasises a similar point about the telephone: 'The telephone offers a quasi-controlled collapse of boundaries, in which the listening self can be pervaded by the vocal body of another while yet remaining at a distance from it' (206). The affective difference was simultaneously social and technological. Nineteenth-century communication devices brought people together and hence were perceived as 'annihilating distance', while storage devices reanimated the dead. The phonograph preserved rather than transmitted sound waves – the voices of the dead seemed uncannily contained inside the phonograph. The physical transmission of sound, by contrast, appeared to enhance life, connecting two distant but equally vital places.

In *The Chimes*, the ringing bells both reproduce sound and communicate messages, but communication is primary. Although the bells continually remind Toby of who he is and where he has come from, they also communicate in visceral terms what he should think about the world and what he owes to himself and his daughter. This medium does not distance sound from body but rather reinforces the sense of material connection. Toby's feeling of being physically battered by sound waves while the bells toll captures this somatic dimension: 'The Chimes came clashing in upon him' and 'made the very air spin' (174); or again, later in the story: 'Bewildered by . . . the uproar of the Bells, which all this while were ringing, [Toby] clung to a wooden pillar for support, and turned his white face here and there, in mute and stunned astonishment' (202).

The assault on Toby's ears shatters his sense of self. The belief in his competence as a porter, which had sustained him through many a frostbitten day while waiting on the streets for work, collapses under this sonic battering. The assault takes the form of reproduced words. Dickens stresses the fact that the bells re-articulate the words Toby had heard earlier in the day. These bells are able to quote the cruel lessons of political economy verbatim. Listen to them repeat the teachings of the three callous rich men that hector Toby earlier in the day: that the complaining poor should be 'put down', that the present was worse than the 'good old Times', and that charity should be regulated by 'Facts and Figures':

Still the Bells, pealing forth their changes, made the very air spin. Put'em down, Put'em down! Good old Times, Good old Times! Facts and Figures, Facts and Figures! Put'em down, Put'em down! If they said anything they said this, till the brain of Toby reeled. (174)

This is an example of what sound reproduction was prior to recording. But an unexamined reliance on a recording paradigm limits our ability to hear it as such. Acoustic technologies that reproduce sound without storing data produce distinctive affects. Reproducing sound by producing it anew preserves the listener's relationship to a singular event, even as it repeats the sounds one has heard before. Toby's experience in the bell tower helps recover what it feels like to hear sounds re-articulated not as disembodied echoes but as material presences. The advent of sound recording may have introduced a new relation to acoustic experience, but it did not do away with older modes of responding to sound. Toby's embodied auditory experience would not have vanished with the

invention of recording – it persisted alongside characteristically 'modern', fragmented affects such as the eerie sense of dislocation experienced by the first auditors of Edison's phonograph.

Where the bells initially produced feelings of safety and reassurance, confirming Toby's identity as a valued worker and member of the community, at the crisis in the story they carry a terrible affect. The shift takes place because Toby's enclosed auditory space is invaded by the three reformers from the upper classes. Alain Corbin sees the territorial identity of a bell, its habitus, as always vulnerable to potential violation. Auditory space is fragile, 'haunted by the notion of limits as well as the threat of their being transgressed' (Corbin 185). Toby's space is violated in a particularly rude fashion when the three men step out of a fine house onto the doorstep where Toby is eating his meagre lunch and begin berating him for his shiftlessness. One who indicts him for eating the supposedly wasteful meal of tripe – wasteful because the poor should consume less expensive dishes – adds injury to insult by taking the last bite of Toby's tripe and popping it into his own mouth.

Dickens's satire of these three reformers, and a fourth wealthy man, a hypocritical philanthropist that Toby meets later in the story, has attracted most of the critical attention that *The Chimes* has received over the years. Michael Slater calls the story 'the most overtly Radical fiction [Dickens] ever wrote' (2009: 229). Dickens told Forster with glee that he was out 'to shame the cruel and canting' (Dickens 1977: 204), and judging from the accusations of the Tory press that he was 'holding up to ridicule and contempt the efforts of the higher classes' (quoted in Slater 1971: 140), Dickens succeeded. The three wealthy men are Mr Filer, a satirical version of a political economist, who proceeds to prove by mathematics that Toby is helping to starve his neighbours and that Meg and her fiancé are too poor to marry (Dickens 1971: 168); Alderman Cute, who prides himself on being able to talk to the poor in their own lingo, wants to 'put down' all the 'nonsense about Want' and the 'cant in vogue about Starvation', and he vows to punish with especial fury anyone who thinks himself so desperate as to attempt suicide (170); and a melancholy man who is always lamenting 'the good old times', when there was a 'bold peasantry, and all that sort of thing' (168).⁸ In the best recent treatment

⁸ Slater discusses the decision Dickens made at the urging of Forster to delete references to Disraeli's Young England movement in the portrait of the Tory

of *The Chimes*, Sally Ledger discusses the influence of Dickens's Radical friend and fellow journalist, Douglas Jerrold, on these satiric portraits, and relates them to Dickens's renunciation of paternalism as a way to ameliorate the condition of the poor (106-41).

These satirical passages were meant to provoke fierce *emotion*, to goad readers into sharing the novelist's outrage. Dickens wants his Christmas audience to understand the magnitude of the injustice in the world. When the bells give voice to the 'hopes and thoughts of mortals', they only say what all humane people should say, what the very streets should shout to the heavens. They cry out in anger at the wrongs of poverty and starvation, of workers reduced to impotent fury, of little girls driven to prostitution, of old men dying abandoned and friendless in the workhouse. As Toby says, 'What does it matter whether they speak it or not?' (161) - they *should* say such things. They should proclaim in peals of embodied speech the hopes and thoughts of mortals. This 'militant joy and scorn' delighted G. K. Chesterton at the beginning of the twentieth century - 'the cheap advice to live cheaply, the base advice to live basely, above all, the preposterous primary assumption that the rich are to advise the poor and not the poor the rich' (Chesterton 124). The satire seems over-obvious and too topical to readers today. But the blatant emotional claims of such polemics allow us to distinguish this vein in his fiction - the political equivalent of the melodramatic vein in the dream of Meg's suicide and the sentimental vein in the rescue of a poor man's daughter from the dangers of prostitution - as vehicles for emotion, with unmistakable Radical intentions and unambiguous lessons for the reader. This vein stands over against the comparatively unstructured and free-floating affect the bells elsewhere provoke.

We witness the affective power of bells most distinctly in Dickens's fiction when they seem to reproduce the inchoate thoughts and words of a people as a whole. Dickens's bells sound notes belonging to social groups, not just personal emotions, and the collective longing their voice most often conveys is captured by a line from a nursery rhyme, 'Turn again, Whittington, Lord Mayor of London'. Characters in *Barnaby Rudge*, *Old Curiosity Shop*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield*, gentleman who misses the good old days (Slater 1970: 511-14), and Slater also identifies Alderman Cure as a satire of Sir Peter Laurie, who had recently gained notoriety for sentencing to hanging an impoverished mother who had attempted to kill herself and her baby (1970: 524).

Bleak House, *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*, all hear that same phrase ringing in the bells of London. The rhyme commemorates the legend that Dick Whittington, thrice mayor of London, was running away from home as a boy to seek his fortune elsewhere until the city bells called him back, promising the greatness he ultimately achieved. The rhyme appealed to Dickens, almost as an allegory of his own success (James Joyce noticed this fact in an essay on Dickens),⁹ and the allegory conveys more than a single idea. For Dickens, the bells in Dick Whittington are connected with virtues such as hard work, self-help and persistence under adversity that the novelist sees as the hallmarks of his own success. For example, when in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, charming but shiftless Dick Swiveller muses, 'Perhaps the bells might strike up "Turn again Swiveller, Lord Mayor of London"', the comedy comes from the immense improbability, despite the fact that, as Swiveller says, 'Whittington's name was Dick' (466).

Like legends, bells accrue whatever societal meanings they possess through repetition of the same motif. Big Ben, for example, has deep associations with English national identity. It is a symbol of England's majesty and power, the note that spoke most clearly in the nineteenth century of London's place as the capital of world-wide empire. One of the earliest sound recordings made on English soil was a tape of Big Ben (1890), a fact that certainly should not surprise us. This recording was made for Thomas Edison by Mary Helen Ferguson, the governess of Edison's London agent, using one of Edison's brown wax cylinders. Mary Ferguson described herself as 'the first English lady phonographist', and she is thought to have been the person who made the recordings of Florence Nightingale and Robert Browning, among others.¹⁰

⁹ Joyce observes that Dickens's true genius flourished best within earshot of 'the chimes of Bow Bells' and that Dickens may have regarded Dick Whittington's story as a parable for the course of his own life (Berrone 34-5). Joyce's essay on Dickens, 'The Centenary of Charles Dickens', was written in Italian as part of an examination for a teaching appointment in Padua.

¹⁰ In an e-mail communication, Jason Camlot supplies the following information about Mary Helen Ferguson from an unpublished manuscript by Bennett Maxwell in the British Library: 'Mary Helen Ferguson was governess to the Gouraud children and also worked as Colonel Gouraud's part-time secretary. Shortly after the arrival of the "Perfected Phonograph" she wrote an article for *The Lady* in which she described herself as "the first English lady phonographist", in other words, the first audio typist. Many of Colonel Gouraud's early speech recordings were accompanied by a typed transcript, and these were usually signed with the

The collective character of bells' sonic experience has the advantage for an artist such as Dickens of expanding the range of figurative associations with which the note could be charged. In that respect, sound reproduction before recording functioned a little like fairy tales, legends and literary conventions. Each repetition of a fairy tale or rhyme is a new performance, but it draws upon the accumulated reservoir of associations created by prior performances. This is the deep logic 'Dick Whittington' shares with a bell. Both rhyme and ring mean more by sounding the same. This idea can be taken further. Dickens's view of bells is related to his love of barrel organs, pantomimes, Punch and Judy shows and the popular theatre. All these modes of popular entertainment are so conventional as to be what we call formulaic. They represent a form of folk memory, of reproduction without recording. Yet each performance is unique. It is not merely the associations of the listener that vary. The objective conditions of each rehearing change – the air quality, surrounding noises, time of day, proximity, attention level, social context and more. The effect is of repetition within the context of difference, an effect that allows the imagination – both private and public – room to range.

A similar affect is achieved by allegory in Dickens. At the climax of *The Chimes*, Dickens personifies the bells as goblins. The allegorical personification gives rise to the story's subtitle, 'A Goblin Story of Some Bells that Rang an Old Year Out and a New Year In', and it inspires the copious illustrations, created by no fewer than four of the author's favoured artists. The illustrations carry this personification to extravagant lengths. The frontispiece (Figure 1) shows nude goblins streaming from the mouths of the bells and flowing to all the margins of the page. The story is divided into four quarters, and each begins with an illustration showing the various moods and expressions Toby will hear in the bells during that chapter. In Richard Doyle's opening plate for the 'The Second Quarter' (Figure 2), the goblins grin their approval at Toby comforting a fugitive labourer and his exhausted little girl. During Toby's nightmare, in which he climbs to the top of the church tower, or dreams he does, the goblins angrily reproach him for believing what the political economists have said. The

initials M.H.F. She went on to make recordings of Florence Nightingale, Martin Lanford, Robert Browning and Cardinal Manning, and was later placed in charge of the "Music Room" at Edison House in Northumberland Avenue, where she supervised all the musical recordings.'

third section begins with another illustration by Doyle. Dickens explains these goblin figures as manifestations of Toby's own thoughts: 'Spirits of the Bells. Their sound upon the air. . . They take such shapes and occupations as the hopes and thoughts of mortals, and the recollections they have stored up, give them' (208).

This explanation might at first seem to trivialise the sound of the bells. It suggests that their unchanging tones can only express what a listener reads into them, that the meanings they reproduce are only projections of the hearer's own thoughts. But this point – virtually self-evident to the sceptical modern reader – is not what Dickens means to convey. The multitudinous goblins that throng the drawings and texts indicate the collective character of the bells' allegory. It is instructive that Dickens's allegorical bent surfaced in his Christmas books, tales meant to embody the spirit of a shared festival season. At its most basic, allegory functions by invoking communal values. It gives most pleasure when its listeners understand and accept the world view it expresses. This is how allegory escapes being merely subjective, and this is why readers who are used to the multiple meanings of modern texts sometimes find allegory unappealing. Sceptical modern readers do not like a work's meaning being circumscribed. They do not like having to accept a collective understanding rather than their own, private interpretation. But before recording technology made sound into a form of writing, allegory was one of the most effective ways reproduced sounds gave voice to public meanings. A bell such as Big Ben allegorises English national pride, regardless of what personal associations it also has for individuals.

At the end of *The Chimes* Toby awakes from his self-shattering dreams and finds a joyous New Year's day dawning. Meg is beside him, plying her needle to brighten her simple wedding dress with ribbons. While Toby struggles to shake the cobwebs from his head, the circle by the hearth is joined by his daughter's fiancé, and shortly thereafter, what should start ringing in the New Year, but the 'Great Bells', 'melodious, deep-mouthed, noble Bells' (242)? No sooner had the pealing finished than the door was thrown open again to admit the labourer and his little girl, whom Toby had saved from starving the day before, and again, to admit a whole procession of friends and neighbours, beating on drums and playing bells, 'not the Bells, but a portable collection, on a frame' (243). And as you might expect, the story ends on this joyous note, closing right there with only a final direct address to You, the reader, to join the celebration.

The ending takes only a few pages, for the restoration of emotion, narrative and New Year's good cheer comes so pat to Dickens that he need spend almost no time on this dénouement. After the indistinct and disordering affects, the allegorical assault of goblin sounds, familiar sentiments perform their expected role in drawing the tale to a close. The ready availability of these emotions for their appointed task cheapens them in our eyes. We have learned to prefer the kind of 'intensities' (Massumi) that lie at the very edge of intelligibility. What we have not learned, or perhaps have forgotten, is how the body listens to remembered sounds.

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Dickens, sexuality and the body; or, clock loving: Master Humphrey's queer objects of desire

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By way of an abstract

This essay comes out of Dickens's fascination with stuff: specifically his interrelated interests in strange bodies and strange things. It brings together lines of enquiry inspired by thing theory, queer theory and gender studies to explore Dickens's investment in the imaginative, emotional and erotic appeal of objects. I suggest that in conjunction these approaches reveal the centrality of the material to Dickens's queer imagination, as his thinking on human/object relations participates in his wider scrutiny of the naturalness and inevitability of gender roles, heterosexuality, and, indeed, the human. In this I am particularly inspired by William Cohen's recent treatment of queer, which is not (just) about 'sexual counterthodoxy' but about a presentation of 'the openness of the body to the world by the senses as a type of permeability, or penetrability, that is not reducible to heterosexuality, nor is it even limited to the realm of the sexual'. Queer theory here meets posthuman and cyborgian approaches, offering a 'critique of the human – with its phantasmatic completeness and integrity' (2008: 134). I take as my focus the bizarre text *Master Humphrey's Clock* as Dickens's most explicit meditation on the joys of object-loving.

Reading Dickensian sex

Dickens's work is 'absolutely saturated', James Eli Adams recently announced, with sexuality (235).¹ Eli Adams reads the sexual as cannily presented by Dickens as blatant public spectacle rather than a hidden truth uncovered

¹ Eli Adams uses *The Pickwick Papers* as his central example.