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Dickens and Soundscape: The Old Curiosity Shop

John O. JORDAN

- 1 With his important 1977 book *The Tuning of the World*, composer/environmentalist R. Murray Schafer introduced the term “soundscape” into scholarly discourse and together with his colleagues in the World Soundscape Project inaugurated the discipline of acoustic ecology. Sound studies, as this interdisciplinary field has come to be known more generally, draws on a large number of more traditional research areas, including musicology, acoustics, the phenomenology of hearing, architecture, urban planning, theatre studies, anthropology and the history of sound recording technologies, to name only a few. The field has its own specialized journals: *Soundscape: A Journal of Acoustic Ecology*, founded in 2000 and named after Schafer’s influential term; *Sound Studies*, founded in 2011; and the *Journal of Sonic Studies*, also begun in 2011. It has its own professional organizations: The World Forum for Acoustic Ecology (WFAE), established in 1993, and the European Sound Studies Association, founded in 2012; and has seen the publication of a growing number of sound studies handbooks and anthologies designed for use in college and university courses (Bull and Back, Pinch and Bijesterveld, Sterne).
- 2 Formed by analogy with more familiar English words such as “landscape” and “cityscape,” the term “soundscape” eludes easy definition. For Schafer, a soundscape is “any acoustic field of study” (7). The term as thus defined has been criticized by some as too vague and Schafer’s use of it as too freighted with ideological assumptions (Kelman), but it has caught on, in part because its very vagueness allows it to be adapted for many purposes. Soundscapes can be perceived, recorded, invented, reconstructed or represented. They can be found in natural or made environments; they can be created by engineers and sound artists; they can be analyzed by historians and cultural critics.
- 3 Although sound studies research has largely tended to focus on periods since the invention of modern sound recording technologies, recent decades have witnessed a steady increase in the number of studies devoted to recovering and analyzing sounds of the more distant past. Important contributions here include Alain Corbin’s *Les Cloches de*

la terre (1994; trans. as *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-century French Countryside*, 1998), Bruce R. Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999) and Steven Connor's *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (2000). Within Victorian studies, John Picker's *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003) was the first sustained attempt to examine the place of sound in nineteenth-century British literature and culture. Picker's chapter on Dickens is especially noteworthy for the information it contains about Dickens's interest in the rather eccentric theory of sound advanced by his friend, the mathematician Charles Babbage.

- 4 In his *Ninth Bridgewater Treatise: A Fragment* (1837), Babbage proposed the idea, which he claimed to derive from Laplace, that the earth's atmosphere functions like a huge recording device. According to Babbage, every sound ever made and every word ever spoken leaves an impression on the molecules of the air. These molecules and the pulsations they receive, he argues, retain, however faintly, the imprint of their source and at least in principle and under certain circumstances, can be made to reproduce the original sound. "The air itself," Babbage writes,

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 changeful will. (112)

- 5 This remarkable quotation, Picker goes on to show, explains an otherwise obscure passage in *Dombey and Son* where Dickens describes the socially volatile character of Sir Barnet Skettles as "like a sound in air, the vibration of which, according to the speculation of an ingenious modern philosopher, may go on travelling for ever through the interminable fields of space" (287). The ingenious modern philosopher here is of course Babbage, and Dickens's paraphrase neatly summarizes the main tenet of his theory.

1. From Dickensian Voice to Dickensian Sound

- 6 Evidence of Dickens's interest in sound and its effects can be found at many points in his novels. Until recently, however, attention to the sonic dimensions of his fiction has centered primarily on questions of voice. Readers have long recognized Dickens's extraordinary ability to capture the distinctive accent and speech patterns of his characters. Jingle, Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp, Micawber, Bounderby and Flora Finching are immediately identifiable as soon as they begin to talk. Orality figures prominently in other aspects of Dickens's personal and professional life, from his early talent for mimicry to his involvement in the theatre, his experience as a shorthand reporter of parliamentary debates, and his tremendous popular success as a performer of public readings adapted from his works.
- 7 Dickens's voice as a storyteller has also been an important focus of recent research. Taking up the challenge presented by deconstructive theory with its emphasis on *écriture*, Ivan Kreilcamp has explored the complex relationship between speech and writing in Dickens's career. Building on earlier work by Philip Collins, Malcolm Andrews and Deborah Vlock, Kreilcamp locates a crucial ambivalence in Dickens's attitude toward orality—his wish on the one hand to mobilize the power of oral discourse and to identify it with his own work, and, on the other, his distrust of loose talk, gossip and empty

rhetoric, and his efforts to expose these forms of irresponsible speech and submit them to the discipline of professional control.

- 8 Voice and orality are unquestionably central features of Dickens's work, but they are not the whole of what Schafer would have us understand by the term "soundscape." Soundscape for Schafer encompasses the totality of an acoustic environment and requires that listeners attend to the sonic background against which the more salient sounds that he calls "signals" stand out in stronger relief. Apprehending the soundscape of a Dickens novel requires a similar kind of reorientation, a shifting of attention not entirely away from voice but onto the broader acoustic field in which voice is one of many elements.
- 9 Several critics have followed Picker in attending to this broader band of acoustic data in Dickens's writing. Rosemarie Bodenheimer has noted Dickens's ability to capture the sounds of the street, and Chris Louttit has highlighted his interest in the sounds of work. The most probing investigation to date of Dickens's interest in sound appears in a series of essays by Jay Clayton. In "The Dickens Tape," Clayton takes the 1844 Christmas story *The Chimes* as his point of entry into Dickens's rich acoustic world. Drawing on affect theory and distinguishing between sound recording and sound "reproduction," Clayton argues forcefully for the ability of sound to produce effects on the listening body that exceed rational comprehension or even emotion, as that term is usually understood. For Clayton, the repetitive sound of bells, like those in the story of Toby Veck, has a collective or communal significance that he likens to the associations carried by folktale, legend and literary conventions such as allegory.
- 10 Clayton's is one of the very few critical studies to examine soundscape in relation to a single Dickens text. In what follows, I propose to consider the role of sound in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), not in order to claim a single determinate meaning or function for its sonic effects, but as a way of demonstrating the range of Dickens's auditory imagination and analyzing a few of its specific operations. Babbage's theory of permanent sonic vibrations, while not the only conceptual model applicable to *The Old Curiosity Shop*, will make a brief appearance toward the end of my discussion.
- 11 One way to begin consideration of the Dickensian soundscape is with a preliminary taxonomy. I discern four, perhaps five distinct categories of sound that appear in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and presumably in other Dickens novels as well. First are natural sounds, by which I mean sounds produced by the non-human environment: by animals, by wind and moving water, by weather generally or by any natural force independent of human agency. Next are mechanical sounds: those produced directly or indirectly as a result of human actions, but without involving the human voice. A third category, the largest and most frequently recognized dimension of Dickensian sound effects, is that of voice in general, and of human speech in particular. In addition to these three rather obvious general categories, there is a fourth and particularly rich form of sound in Dickens whose status is less certain and whose source frequently remains ambiguous. These sounds, which we might call "uncanny," are ones that derive from a source outside the merely natural or human sphere or else result from the blurring of distinctions between the other categories. Examples of uncanny sound include the talking chair in "The Bagman's Story," one of the intercalated tales in *The Pickwick Papers*, or the waves that little Paul listens to so intently in *Dombey and Son*. Perhaps the most common form of uncanny sound in Dickens is the echo, with its simultaneous suggestion of ghostly return and ominous portent. A fifth and final category of Dickensian sound effect, different in kind from the others but necessary to them as backdrop and precondition, is silence.

- 12 Significantly for my purpose, the themes of sound and hearing appear early in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In the third paragraph of the novel's opening chapter, immediately after introducing himself as a nocturnal wanderer of city streets, the narrator, Master Humphrey, offers the following oblique commentary on his speculative cast of mind:

That constant pacing to and fro, that never-ending restlessness, that incessant tread of feet wearing the rough stones smooth and glossy—is it not a wonder how the dwellers in narrow ways can bear to hear it! Think of a sick man in such a place as Saint Martin's Court, listening to the footsteps, and in the midst of pain and weariness obliged, despite himself (as though it were a task he must perform) to detect the child's step from the man's, the slipshod beggar from the booted exquisite, the lounging from the busy, the dull heel of the sauntering outcast from the quick tread of an expectant pleasure-seeker—think of the hum and noise being always present to his senses, and of the stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come. (8)

- 13 Who is this invalid of Saint Martin's Court, condemned to listen as if from the grave to the endless footsteps of passers-by and to speculate on their identities? Why at this early stage does the story foreground hearing to such an extent and to the near exclusion of other sense impressions? And what is it that we as readers should be listening for as we make our way through the book?
- 14 Several possible identifications for this figure come to mind. Presumably the invalid is Master Humphrey himself or, rather, an imaginary alter ego who shares Humphrey's interest in children and whose effort to distinguish "the child's step from the man's" anticipates the encounter with Nell that will occur only a few paragraphs later. Or is the man of Saint Martin's Court a preliminary sketch of Master Humphrey's housebound double, the single gentleman, who spends most of his time shut up in his room at Bevis Marks and who, ever on the alert for Punch, also appears to rely to a great extent on his sense of hearing? Or might the invalid be an early version of that other displaced consciousness, the omniscient narrator, who takes over from Humphrey at the end of Chapter 3 and who, like the invalid, apprehends a world in which he cannot participate? Indeed, can we think of the ability to overhear things without being seen as a version of novelistic omniscience? Literary scholars have often theorized omniscience as a form of visual power, using a model of sight that draws on the work of Michel Foucault and the infamous panopticon prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in which a single centrally located guardian was able to keep watch over a multitude of prisoners. But omniscience could just as well be figured as a power of hearing. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is full of scenes where one character listens to a conversation from an adjacent room and thereby gains knowledge or power over others. Finally, perhaps the invalid of Saint Martin's Court may be a figure for the reader, who, as he embarks on the task of making sense of a new text, must learn to listen as well as to see, to make meaningful distinctions out of the random noise of experience. In this respect, the "hum and noise [...] always present to his senses" could be understood as an auditory version of the "magic reel" of fiction that unwinds in the novel's final chapter. What he and we are listening for, I suggest, are sound tracks—audible clues; and like most of the sound tracks in this novel they lead eventually to Nell. Whoever this invalid may be, the paragraph clearly draws attention to hearing as a special mode of perception and to sound as a medium through which crucial intelligence can be obtained.

2. Natural Sounds and the Sound of Silence

- 15 Of the five types of sound effect that I have enumerated, neither natural sounds nor silence need detain us for very long. Despite the rural setting of much of the book, *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains few scenes that attempt to imagine the natural world, either visual or auditory. Dickens is not particularly interested in recording the sounds of nature, at least not in this book. The closest he comes to doing so is in his description of the storm that forces Nell and grandfather to take shelter in *The Valiant Soldier*, but even this storm merits only a brief paragraph and is quite conventional in its sound effects. It is perhaps a measure of Dickens's lack of interest in natural sound that, so far as I can tell, Nell's bird, although it survives until the end of the book, never warbles a note.
- 16 Silence, on the other hand, receives more attention and carries greater thematic weight in *The Old Curiosity Shop* than do the sounds of nature, though I shall touch only briefly on its significance. Silence is for the most part a quality that is prized and sought after in this book; and like its counterparts, peace of mind and physical rest, silence is in relatively short supply. For Nell, silence is associated with security and refuge. Although she enjoys Kit's laughter, on the whole she prefers the quiet and seclusion of her life with grandfather. Her home in the shop is an island of tranquility in the midst of the great city, at least until those noisy intruders, Quilp and Brass, invade it. Nell herself is always soft-spoken, unlike the many loud, verbally aggressive characters who surround and often persecute her with their talk. After she leaves home, her constant wish is to find a tranquil place of rest, away from Quilp's intrusive verbal intimacies, the harsh noise of the industrial town or the songs of the bargemen (to mention only some of the sounds that assault her). The paradox of silence in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, of course, is that it resides most often in places associated with death—graveyards, churches and ecclesiastical outbuildings such as the one where Nell and grandfather finally come to live. Nell's search for silence leads eventually to the deep, dark well inside the church whose distant echoes, the sexton tells her, make the heart leap into your mouth. It leads, that is, to the grave.

3. Mechanical Sounds: Popular Culture, Industry, Travel

- 17 More interesting and more varied than either natural sounds or silence are the passages in *The Old Curiosity Shop* that evoke the sounds that I have called mechanical. One broad set of these derives from the world of popular culture to which the novel devotes so much of its attention. Kit and Barbara's visit to Astley's with their mothers and Little Jacob, for example, is a set piece of raucous cacophony. From the opening musical fanfare "with strong parts for the drums, and sweet effects for the triangles" to the gunfire, "which made Barbara wink," Astley's is full of noise. The reaction of the audience is equally loud and enthusiastic: "Little Jacob applauded till his hands were sore; Kit cried 'an-kor' at the end of everything, the three-act piece included; and Barbara's mother beat her umbrella on the floor, in her ecstasies, until it was nearly worn down to the gingham" (298).
- 18 Elsewhere in the novel, Dickens takes great care to indicate the musical instruments appropriate to each of the performing groups that Nell and grandfather encounter on the

road. Codlin and Short announce the arrival of their Punch and Judy show with a trumpet blast:

When they came to any town or village, or even to a detached house of good appearance, Short blew a blast upon the brazen trumpet and carolled a fragment of a song in that hilarious tone common to Punches and their consorts. If people hurried to the windows, Mr. Codlin pitched the temple, and hastily unfurling the drapery and concealing Short therewith, flourished hysterically on the Pipes and performed an air. (137–38)

- 19 Grinder's stilt-walkers advertise their performances with a drum and tambourine. Jerry's performing dogs play a barrel organ as part of their act. One poor dog, in disgrace for having lost a halfpenny earlier in the day, is forced to go without his supper and does penance by grinding out the "Old Hundredth" mournfully as he watches his fellows consume their meal. Even the "classical" Mrs. Jarley promotes her stupendous collection with a drum and trumpet and decorates her caravan with well-used musical instruments: a triangle, a couple of well-thumbed tambourines and the large drum that serves as her dinner table. The noisiest entertainers of all, however, are the Punch men, whose distinctive cries bring the mysterious single gentleman bolting from his room and whose troop of admiring followers so disturb the tranquility of Bevis Marks with their "hallooing and hooting" (279) that Sampson Brass resorts to "bribing the drivers of hackney cabriolets to come suddenly round the corner and dash in among them precipitately" in an effort to drive them away. Despite his apparent wish for peace and quiet on this occasion, Sampson Brass can be quite a noisy disturber of the peace when he has a mind. The scene where he beats on the single gentleman's door is another scene of cacophony, and there are other door knocking scenes in the book that emphasize the permeability of space and the many violated thresholds in the book.
- 20 Another group of "mechanical" sounds in *Curiosity Shop* are the ones associated with urban and industrial settings. If Dickens seems to care relatively little in this book for the sounds of nature, his ear is ever alert to the oppressive noise and clatter of the city. When Nell and grandfather enter the large manufacturing town in Chapter 44, they are stunned by the "roar of carts and waggons laden with clashing wares, the slipping of horses' feet upon the wet and greasy pavement, the rattling of rain on windows and umbrella-tops, the jostling of the more impatient passengers, and all the noise and tumult of a crowded street in the high tide of its occupation" (329). Even more oppressive to their ears are the sounds of the factory to which they accompany the man by the fire. They follow him to "a large and lofty building, supported by pillars of iron, with great black apertures in the upper walls, open to the external air; echoing to the roof with the beating of hammers and roar of furnaces, mingled with the hissing of red-hot metal plunged in water, and a hundred strange unearthly noises never heard elsewhere" (334). Worst of all, however, are the gothic shrieks and groans of the factory machines they pass on the outskirts of town as they depart. "[S]trange engines spun and writhed like tortured creatures; clanking their iron chains, shrieking in their rapid whirl from time to time as though in torment unendurable, and making the ground tremble with their agonies" (339). Writhing and moaning like lost souls in torment, the machines are transformed into sentient creatures, their sounds no longer merely mechanical, but ghostly or uncannily human. Their eerie moans also anticipate the cries and shouts of the unemployed whom Nell and grandfather see marching through the streets at night. Given the amount of oppressive noise with which Nell must contend, it is hardly surprising that she states her wish to escape so often in terms of the need for peace and quiet.

- 21 A third group of “mechanical” sounds to which Dickens pays special attention in this novel of the road consists in the sounds of travel. For the most part, Nell and grandfather pursue their journey on foot, and Nell is increasingly exhausted as a result. As Hilary Schor has noted (32), Nell almost literally walks herself to death. Occasionally the two travelers hitch a ride in a wagon or a barge, but even these brief respites are not always secure, as the barge experience amply demonstrates. In this scene Nell is oppressed by noise and is even forced by the drunken bargemen to contribute to it herself, singing the same songs over and over again all through the night. “[M]any a cottager,” we read, “who was roused from his soundest sleep by the discordant chorus as it floated away upon the wind, hid his head beneath the bed-clothes and trembled at the sounds” (328). Canals, of course, were an important feature of the industrial expansion of the Midlands, so the bargemen belong to the modern industrial world that Dickens is exploring during this part of the book.
- 22 Two instances of pleasant traveling stand out among the predominantly painful descriptions of Nell’s journey. Both are distinguished by their attention to sound. Here is the comforting sound, at once domestic and nautical, of Mrs. Jarley’s caravan getting under way: “[A]way they went, with a great noise of flapping and creaking and straining, and the bright brass knocker, which nobody ever knocked at, knocking one perpetual double-knock of its own accord as they jolted heavily along” (204). Like the invalid of the opening chapter, Nell here is confined to an interior, and like the invalid she hears but does not see. The flapping, creaking and straining resemble the sounds of a sailing ship getting under way, while the double knock suggests at once the postman’s arrival and, at a deeper psychological level, the maternal heartbeat as experienced by an infant *in utero*. After all, Mrs. Jarley is as close as Nell ever comes in the novel to having a mother.
- 23 Equally benign and even more distinctive is the extended description of Nell’s drowsy journey in the wagon procured by the schoolmaster to carry her to the village where she will take up what proves to be her final residence. The passage is focalized entirely through the listening consciousness of Nell.
- What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly-moving mountain, listening to the tinkling of the horses’ bells, the occasional smacking of the carter’s whip, the smooth rolling of the great broad wheels, the rattle of the harness, the cheery good-nights of passing travellers jogging past on little short-stepped horses—all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head jogged to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue, and hearing all these sounds like dreamy music, lulling to the senses [...]—when was there a journey with so many delights as that journey in the waggon! (349–50)
- 24 For almost the first time since she and grandfather set out on their journey, Nell is comfortable and happy. But it is too late. The delicious, womb-like drowsiness into which she sinks so readily is another measure of her fatigue and anticipates the final sleep that awaits her at her journey’s end. Unlike the more joyous coaching scenes in Dickens’s earlier novels, here the emphasis is on the passivity of the passenger; Nell’s sleep is not the blessed regression to infancy of Pickwick, but the exhaustion of travel.

4. Voice and Vocal Displacement

- 25 Of all the sounds represented in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, by far the largest number belongs to the category of voice. Dickens is of course preeminently the novelist of voice, and his ability to create memorable characters by giving them their own distinctive speech habits has long been recognized as one of the singular achievements of his art. According to George Henry Lewes, Dickens once claimed “that every word said by his characters was distinctly *heard* by him” (101). Like Sloppy in *Our Mutual Friend*, who “do the police in different voices,” or like the comic vocalist Little Swills in *Bleak House*, who recreates the legal inquest following Nemo’s death by taking every part in turn, Dickens is a brilliant vocal impersonator.
- 26 Like all of Dickens’s novels, *The Old Curiosity Shop* contains a rich variety of speaking parts. Among the minor characters endowed with distinctive speech patterns we might notice the impudent clerk, Mr. Chuckster, with his affected urbanity and patronizing treatment of Kit; or Mrs. Jarley, whose conversations invariably modulate into the rhetoric of self-promotion (her “exhibition tone”) whenever she has occasion to mention her “stupendous collection.” Another set piece of polyphonic virtuosity, typical in its theatricality and its use of free indirect discourse, is the report of Kit’s trial in Chapter 63, in which the narrative imitates judge, lawyers and witnesses each in turn. The entire scene is a reprise, on a smaller scale, of the Bardell vs. Pickwick trial in *The Pickwick Papers*.
- 27 Interestingly, Nell and most of the other “good” people in the book lack the verbal markers that would set their speech apart from that of other characters. Nell is said to possess a “sweet” and a “pretty” voice, one that reminds grandfather of Nell’s mother and that causes the man by the fire to say, “Speak again, [...] do I know the voice?” (333) as if he recognized something familiar in it from his past. But sweetness, like beautiful landscape, does not lend itself readily to individuation. We know that Nell works as a guide at Mrs. Jarley’s waxworks, and she later accompanies groups of people on tours of the village church and graveyard, but in neither instance do we hear her voice. In fact, it is remarkable how seldom she speaks at all. Few readers, I suspect, can remember more than one or two significant things she says. She has no line comparable to Oliver’s famous “Please, sir, I want some more.” Instead, it is the book’s comic and grotesque characters whose voices stand out most distinctly: Sampson Brass with his oily obsequiousness; Quilp, whose vocal register ranges from animal croaks to a sarcastic, often sadistic wit; and finally, of course, Dick Swiveller, “that great human jukebox,” as John Bowen calls him (142), whose character is a brilliant composite of theatrical clichés and snatches of popular song, spliced together (as if by some slightly crazed disk jockey) into a virtuoso performance that has won him the admiration of critics and ordinary readers alike.
- 28 Rather than attempt to catalog the different kinds of speech or idiolects that the novel contains, I want instead to direct attention to another, less obvious feature of the way in which voice is represented in *The Old Curiosity Shop*—its frequent dissociation or displacement from the body. The most common examples of the separation of voice from body take place in what we might think of as a version of the familiar theatrical entrance in which a character speaks before coming on stage. The equivalent in narrative fiction of such entrances occurs when a character speaks before the narrator has mentioned that he or she is present in a scene. Dickens uses this technique frequently for surprise effect—

to introduce a character suddenly or to indicate that someone has been present without our knowing it, either because that person has been hiding or is for some other reason insignificant or easy to overlook. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the chief practitioner of the surprise entrance is Quilp, who is always sneaking up on people and listening in on their conversation and who sneaks up on the reader in a similar fashion. Examples of the second kind, the insignificant or unnoticed character, include Nell, the Marchioness and the young Abel Garland, all of whom make their initial appearance in the book as a disembodied voice.

- 29 The dissociation of voice and body also occurs in other, less predictable contexts in the book. Here, for example, is an early description of Kit: “The lad had a remarkable manner of standing sideways as he spoke, and thrusting his head forward over his shoulder, as if he could not get at his voice without that accompanying action” (14). Voice here is figured as something outside the body rather than as a sound produced from within. Kit must make a physical effort to “get at” his voice lest it elude him altogether. Even Dick Swiveller, the character in whom voice and person seem most happily united, is momentarily troubled by the possibility that he may have lost them both. When he recovers from his illness, his first words to the Marchioness are: “Marchioness, [...] be pleased to draw nearer. First of all, will you have the goodness to inform me where I shall find my voice; and secondly, what has become of my flesh?” (477). Illness puts Dick’s subjectivity at risk and renders his identity dispersed. To lose one’s voice becomes for him more than an empty metaphor. A third example of vocal displacement (and a wonderful example of Dickensian metaphor) is the following description of Sampson Brass:

It was a maxim with Mr. Brass that the habit of paying compliments kept a man's tongue oiled without any expense; and, as that useful member ought never to grow rusty or creak in turning on its hinges in the case of a practitioner of the law, in whom it should be always glib and easy, he lost few opportunities of improving himself by the utterance of handsome speeches and eulogistic expressions. And this had passed into such a habit with him, that, if he could not be correctly said to have his tongue at his fingers' ends, he might certainly be said to have it anywhere but in his face. (263)

- 30 In this case it is not voice directly that is displaced, but the organ of speech—the tongue. The grotesque anatomical metaphor that Dickens briefly conjures here, of a tongue at Sampson Brass’s fingertips, might serve more generally as a figure for the displacement of speech into writing, a metaphor as apt for the modern writer at her computer as it is for the nineteenth-century author with his quill.
- 31 The chief instance of vocal displacement in the book—one that the other examples I have cited all gesture toward in one way or another—is the displacement that occurs in the novel’s narrative structure. After narrating the first three chapters of the story, Master Humphrey steps aside and yields his position to an impersonal voice that carries the story forward to the end. But does Master Humphrey really disappear, or has he just gone into hiding and allowed his voice, like Sampson Brass’s tongue, to keep working, but from a different location while he continues to overhear “those who have prominent and necessary parts” (33) in the story? Audrey Jaffe argues that *The Old Curiosity Shop* “repeatedly focuses on observational activity, shifting from an unframed, central action to an observer on the periphery of that action” (54) who is in turn displaced by another observer, and so on. The novel as a whole, she argues, is structured around a series of similar visual displacements that move between subject and object and that are central to

the nature of curiosity. The nature of Dickensian omniscience, she insists, is that the omniscient narrator can never quite manage to be entirely inside or entirely outside of the narrative. My own argument is similar, though I would place greater emphasis on the displacement of voice and on the various narrator surrogates who appear in the text after Humphrey takes his leave, especially the ones who through their age, infirmity, melancholy outlook or solicitous concern for Nell, recall Master Humphrey himself. These avatars of Humphrey include the man by the fire, the schoolmaster, the bachelor, the clergyman, the sexton and of course the single gentleman, whom we discover, from Master Humphrey's "confession" in the *Clock* material that immediately follows the novel—and against all probability—to have been Master Humphrey in his role as grandfather's younger brother.

5. Uncanny Sounds in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Master Humphrey's Clock*

- 32 The topic of the displaced, disembodied or dematerialized voice brings me to the final category of sound that I want to take up with respect to *The Old Curiosity Shop*: the sounds I have called "uncanny." I have already mentioned one example of this type—the machines in Chapter 45 whose ghostly shrieks and moans stand in for the suffering of factory workers and the unemployed. A more complete account of uncanny sounds in the book would take us back to *Master Humphrey's Clock*, to Master Humphrey himself and to the old house in which he lives. According to Humphrey, his house is a repository of memories that take the form of ghostly sounds.

It is a silent, shady place, with a paved courtyard so full of echoes, that sometimes I am tempted to believe that faint responses to the noises of old times linger there yet, and that these ghosts of sound haunt my footsteps as I pace it up and down. I am the more confirmed in this belief, because, of late years, the echoes that attend my walks have been less loud and marked than they were wont to be; and it is pleasanter to imagine in them the rustling of silk brocade, and the light step of some lovely girl, than to recognize in their altered note the failing tread of an old man. (5)

- 33 Recluse, fantasist, audiophile and connoisseur of female footsteps, the Master Humphrey of this passage closely resembles the invalid of Saint Martin's Court in the novel's opening chapter. Master Humphrey's mansion in effect functions as a kind of preternatural sound storage facility. Its courtyard and empty rooms are a warehouse where sounds from the past still linger, awaiting activation by the presence of an attentive listener, whose motion triggers the ghostly playback mechanism. Here, on a less cosmic scale, we can recognize Babbage's theory of acoustic permanence, of sounds that do not disappear but remain, like ghosts, awaiting retrieval. With its exterior courtyard and its intricate interior architecture of "low ceilings crossed by clumsy beams; its walls of wainscot, dark stairs and gaping closets; its small chambers, communicating with each other by winding passages or narrow steps; its many nooks, scarce larger than its corner-cupboards," the house replicates the structure of human hearing. Is it too much to suggest that Master Humphrey lives inside a giant artificial ear? (6)
- 34 Another important source of uncanny sound effects is the famous clock that lends its name to Master Humphrey's reading society, the group of elderly gentlemen who gather biweekly to read aloud manuscripts extracted from the clock case. Part human and part

machine, the clock is a kind of nineteenth-century android. It serves as a cheerful companion, offering comfort and consolation for the sorrows of Master Humphrey's life. The clock is introduced immediately after Humphrey recounts the story of his childhood: how his mother died when he was young and how he first came to the early realization, after seeing the look of sorrow on her face, that he was a "poor crippled boy" (9). Although he remains attached to many inanimate objects associated with his past, the clock occupies a special place among them—largely because the regular throb of its pendulum makes it easy to endow with human qualities. In Humphrey's fantasy, the clock seems to take the place of the absent mother and helps compensate for the pain of her loss. "I incline to it as if it were alive, and could understand and give me back the love I bear it" (9). Along with its regular heartbeat, the clock also has a distinctive voice. Humphrey finds society in its "cricket-voice" (9) and reassurance in the sound of its bell in the dead of night. The clock speaks to him with the intimacy of a loved one or a parent. "[H]ow often," he writes, "in the summer twilight, when my thoughts have wandered back to a melancholy past, have its regular whisperings recalled them to the calm and peaceful present!" (9). The clock's audible presence sets it apart from other material objects and reinforces the fantasy that it is a living being, the source and repository of stories that bring comfort to the melancholy man.

- 35 I want to conclude this survey of acoustic effects in *The Old Curiosity Shop* by considering what is, for me, the strangest, most uncanny sound that the novel represents: the sound that registers the death of little Nell. Readers will remember that after Nell and grandfather's whereabouts have been determined, a rescue party composed of Kit, Mr. Garland and the single gentleman sets out to find and bring her back to London. As they approach the ruined parsonage to which they have been directed, Kit spies a lighted window and goes on ahead toward it. He tries to see inside, but a curtain has been drawn. Visual access to the scene, both for Kit and for the reader, is denied. He listens, but is greeted only by silence: "again and again the same wearisome blank" (531). Leaving the window, he comes at length to a door.

He knocked. No answer. But there was a curious noise inside. It was difficult to determine what it was. It bore a resemblance to the low moaning of one in pain, but it was not that, being far too regular and constant. Now it seemed a kind of song, now a wail—seemed, that is, to his changing fancy, for the sound itself was never changed or checked. It was unlike anything he had ever heard, and in its tone there was something fearful, chilling, and unearthly. (531)

- 36 Fearful of what this unearthly sound may portend, Kit lifts the latch and prepares to enter, but the weekly installment ends before he or we are allowed to know.
- 37 The dreadful sound is of course grandfather, but to identify him as its sole source is to foreclose prematurely an ambiguity that the narrative takes care to leave open. The horror of this sound lies both in the mystery of its origin and in the uncertainty as to its very nature—whether it is even human. A kind of primal keening, prior to or in excess of any human speech, the sound records a grief that is beyond words, not discourse but abject vocal misery, and once again disembodied, displaced. Notice that grandfather does not make this sound because he thinks that Nell is dead. On the contrary, when Kit enters, the demented old man believes that Nell is only sleeping and even that he hears her voice calling to him. The sound seems to pass through grandfather from without, as if its source were elsewhere and he only its medium of transmission.

- 38 In this sense, we can say that the sound is overdetermined, its origin multiple rather than limited to any one source. It has no single author. Rather, it registers in advance the general grief that will overtake the entire community when the certainty of Nell's death becomes known, including the community of readers in Master Humphrey's circle, as well as contemporary Victorian readers like Lord Jeffrey and Macready, whose actual tears have been recorded (to say nothing of the crowd of Americans, as legend has it, supposedly waiting for news of Nell on the docks in New York harbor). It registers as well a grief that has been slowly accumulating through the narrative in connection with the deaths too numerous to mention that have been reported along the way, from the schoolmaster's little pupil to the three children of the man in Birmingham, where Nell begs for bread, to Master Humphrey's mother or, if we look outside the text, to Mary Hogarth, presumably the encrypted ur-death in this apparently endless chain of signifiers. (And while we're at it, why not mention the literary genealogy that includes Clarissa and Cordelia among others?) It also registers our own grief, as readers, unless we join with Oscar Wilde in warding off that grief with laughter.
- 39 If *The Old Curiosity Shop* can be said to have what Schafer calls a "keynote" (272), a fundamental tone around which the composition as a whole is organized and to which other sounds stand in relationship, I propose that this is it. The "unearthly," disembodied sound that Kit hears at the end of Chapter 70 resonates back through the novel to its earliest moments: to the invalid of Saint Martin's Court who imagines himself condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy graveyard, and to Master Humphrey at his clockside, still grieving for the loss of his young mother (and for himself) and living in an old mansion haunted by "ghosts of sound." It is a melancholy sound, but *The Old Curiosity Shop* is an overwhelmingly melancholy book, at least in the reading that I give to it, and this despite the partially mitigating presence of Swiveller and the Marchioness.
- 40 Finally, no discussion of sound and soundscape in *The Old Curiosity Shop* can be complete without at least some mention of its bells and of the ominous motif implicit in the name Nell, without the silent K, that echoes subliminally through the entire book.¹ Clayton rightly emphasizes the affective dimension of Dickens's bells, their ability to convey meanings that elude rational comprehension. The bells of *The Old Curiosity Shop* function similarly, as premonitions of Nell's inevitable end. As he approaches the tomb where Nell's body will lie, the narrator hears "the bell she had so often heard by night and day, and listened to with a solemn pleasure almost as a living voice" (541). The narrator hears what Nell heard—a double hearing, each with a different inflection. The bell that Nell heard as a "living voice" reveals itself to the narrator and to the reader, as a summons to the grave. The final sentence of "Chapter the Last" picks up the motif of bells with another subliminal pun. "Such are the changes that a few years bring about, and so do things pass away, like a tale that is told" (554). The moral of the book is "tolled" as well as told. It is thus little wonder that, no sooner does he replace the manuscript he has been reading in the case of his beloved clock, than Master Humphrey hears the bells of St. Paul's and recounts the story of his visit to the cathedral clock, the "Heart of London" [that] throbs in its Giant breast," imagining that, "when it should cease to beat, the City would be no more" (107).
- 41 *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a noisy book, one of the noisiest of Dickens's novels, but it is by no means the only one in which sound has an important role to play. Think, for example, of the echoing footsteps outside Lucie Manette's home in *A Tale of Two Cities* or the "drip, drip, drip" that echoes on the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold in *Bleak House* whenever

disaster threatens the Dedlock family. Think too of the scene at the piano between Jasper and Rosa Bud in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; indeed, the topic of music in Dickens is one that deserves further study and that this essay has barely touched upon. Think also of that early sound studies investigator, Stony Durdles, in the same novel, tapping with his hammer on the walls of the crypt in Cloisterham cathedral to locate the corpses his “old ‘uns.” Dickens even makes Durdles briefly a comic proponent of Babbage’s theory of sonic permanence, as the following exchange with Jasper indicates. Durdles asks:

“But do you think there may be Ghosts of other things, though not of men and women?”

“What things? Flower-beds and watering-pots? Horses and harness?”

“No. Sounds.”

“What sounds?”

“Cries.”

- 42 Durdles goes on to explain that a year ago on Christmas eve, he was suddenly awakened by screeches that turn out not to have been heard by any other living ears. He concludes, in language that recalls Master Humphrey’s account of living in a mansion haunted by “ghosts of sound,” that what he heard was “the ghost of a cry” (155–56), another example of what I have called “uncanny sound.”
- 43 As Durdles and these other examples suggest, sound studies offers a potentially fruitful avenue of approach to Dickens’s fiction and to the soundscapes it contains. Critics have long recognized that Dickens possessed a powerful visual imagination. It is time to acknowledge that he possessed an equally acute auditory imagination and that we should listen to his novels as well as read them.

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NOTES

1. The critic most closely attuned to this kind of homophonic wordplay in Dickens is Garrett Stewart. See especially his *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*.

ABSTRACTS

Although critics have devoted considerable attention to the visual dimension of Dickens's novels, relatively little work has been done on Dickens and sound. This essay takes a sound studies approach to reading *The Old Curiosity Shop*, arguing that Dickens possessed a powerful auditory imagination that is on full display in this text. The essay gives a brief history of the term "soundscape," surveys the current state of research on Dickens and sound, proposes a simple taxonomy of Dickensian sound effects, and analyzes various uses to which sound is put in this "noisy" novel.

La critique s'est beaucoup intéressée au visuel dans les romans de Dickens, mais assez peu au sonore. Cet article se sert de la théorie du son pour offrir une lecture de *The Old Curiosity Shop* montrant combien ce texte témoigne de la brillante imagination acoustique de Dickens. Sont ici

proposés un bref historique du concept de « paysage sonore », un état de la recherche sur Dickens et le sonore, une taxonomie simple des effets sonores dans ses textes, ainsi qu'une analyse de la variété de sons inscrite dans ce roman si « bruyant ».

INDEX

Mots-clés: Dickens, Babbage, paysage sonore, voix, imagination sonore, son étrange

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