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Sites of Sound

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Historians of the city concur that the nineteenth century was a particularly incandescent moment in urban development, both in terms of material and perceptual space (Morris and Rodger 1993b:1):

> Between 1820 and 1914 the economy and society of Britain became more extensively and intensively urbanized than ever before. Not only was the rate at which people became concentrated in relatively large, dense and complex settlements greater than it has been before or since, but fundamental changes also took place within and between towns and in the relationship of urban places to British society as a whole.

Through both internal migration and national increase (from nine million in 1801 to 36 million by 1911), by the end of the nineteenth century the urban population in England and Wales had grown from 33.8 percent of the total in 1801 to 78.9 percent by 1911, with the biggest growth rates between 1821 and 1881 (Williams 1973:217; Morris and Rodger 1993b:3). There are of course various ways of defining "urban," but some raw figures are sufficiently eloquent for present purposes. "In 1801 only London contained more than one million people—still well over eleven times the size of its nearest rival, Liverpool. By 1861 there were sixteen places already in the 100,000-plus category, and by 1911, there were forty-two" (Morris and Rodger 1993b:2). Reflecting the connection between urbanization and industrialization, the greatest rate of urban expansion was to be found in manufacturing towns, particularly those in the north including Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, Birmingham, and Liverpool, increasing in size by up to 40 percent in a decade (Williams 1973:220). These converging forces in nineteenth-century urbanization clearly suggest complicity with the consolidation of class divisions associated with capitalism, the confrontations between a dominant bourgeoisie and the working class. The growing conurbation was also "a site of class formation" (Morris and Rodger 1993b:26).

Apart from manual labor in factories, the new infrastructural services required staffing. Professional and trade specializations proliferated, and the distinction between what we would now call blue- and white-collar labor was sharpened. The massive information networks and technologies generated by the nineteenth-century city led to an explosion of bureaucratic workers, particularly in economic sectors like banks, insurance, real estate, and commerce (Williams 1973:147-48). These included clerks, accountants, scriveners, and, increasingly from the 1870s, personnel to operate new or developing information technologies including

telephonists and stenographers using dictaphones and typewriters. By 1910, the clerical profession in England, including 124,000 women, was "one of the most rapidly expanding occupational groups" (Carey 1992:58). Thus, while the uppermost tiers of management could choose to live in bucolic isolation, there were nonetheless also class demarcations traversing the "urban masses," all the more strident because of physical propinquity. The labor force sustaining urban industrialized capitalism did not constitute a single homogeneous urban mass in contradistinction to "management," but was itself differentiated into various layers characterized by various degrees of self-consciousness and forms of social practice.

These demarcations manifested themselves geographically, socioeconomically, and in terms of the urban imaginary, that is, the way in which various sections of the urban population imagined, enacted, and represented themselves. As cities expanded and responded to forces of industrial production, they also segmented into class-based residential precincts. This disintegration of the growing city was noted by Engels in 1844 when he visited Manchester (Engels 1971:54):

> Owing to the curious lay-out of the town it is quite possible for someone to live for years in Manchester and to travel daily to and from his work without ever seeing a working-class quarter or coming into contact with an artisan . . . mainly because the working-class districts and the middle-class districts are quite distinct. The division is due partly to deliberate policy and partly to instinctive and tacit agreement between the two social groups.

The outward growth of the suburbs was one site of these distinctions, providing a space in which the bourgeoisie could distinguish themselves from the world of work and the lower orders. These rapid changes thus transformed urban geography in ways other than simple expansion, in particular by a fragmentation of space. F. M. L. Thompson cites nineteenth-century complaints that (1993:151):

> the alarming rapidity with which they turned pleasant fields into muddy, rutted building sites, the confusion of hundreds of building operations going on simultaneously without any discernible design, the impression that little schemes were starting up everywhere at once and were never being finished, were in themselves frightening portents of disorder and chaos.

The Manchester of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* is a city of "many half-finished streets" (1996:14), and, looking back from the early twentieth century, H. G. Wells' account of the expansion since the mid-eighteenth century of a thinly disguised southern London suburb, Bromley, encapsulates the process like a time-lapse photograph (1946:37):

> The outskirts of Bromstead were a maze of exploitation roads that led nowhere . . . a multitude of uncoördinated fresh starts, each more sweeping and destructive than the last, and none of them ever really worked out to a ripe and satisfactory completion. . . . It was a sort of progress that had bolted; it was change out of hand, and going at an unprecedented pace nowhere in particular.

Revisiting it in what would have been 1910, Wells' narrator reported it "as unfinished as ever; the builders' roads still run out and end in mid-field in their old fashion; the various enterprises jumble in the same contradiction" (38). The infrastructural developments that enabled this chaotic expansion of urban space, and intended to hold it coherently together, ironically in practice also exacerbated the sense of labyrinthine disorder. Proliferating road, rail, and other transport systems imposed new grids, led to demolition and the formation of adjacent slum precincts that absorbed displaced communities, and segmented the urban space into mutually impenetrable components. In 1851 Hastings was a town of 17,000, but cheap rail fares produced a building boom in the 1860s. When Thomas Carlyle rented a local house he experienced "dust, noise, squalor, and the universal tearing and digging as if of gigantic human *swine*, *not* finding any worms or roots that would be useful to them" (cited in Harker 2003:11; italics in source). The older and smaller conurbation, which could be comprehended as a coherent unit as a "walking city," was transformed into the "tracked city," up to thirty miles in radius, in which the episodic and discrete movements of commuters traversed and disrupted the former pedestrian dynamic (Kellett 1993:182; Cannadine 1993:116). Railway systems, arguably "the most important single influence on the spatial arrangement in the Victorian city" (Morris and Rodger 1993b:22), contributed massively to the growing indecipherability of urban space. Apart from further darkening an already heavily polluted atmosphere with their emissions, their multiple tracks and marshaling yards displaced prior occupation (in both senses), presented uncrossable barriers between and within hitherto contiguous and unified districts, completely reorienting local geography and changing focal points in ways that only a bird's eye view could make sense of. An account from 1873 observed of the railway network in south London (cited in Kellett 1993:189):

> There is such a network of rails I do not think there is any one person in England . . . who knows what the different lines are. They run in such innumerable directions, and engines are passing along them at such angles at various speeds, and with so much complication, that I do not think anybody who did not know that they will all be arranged safely but would suppose that they must all come to a general convergence and wreck, and that it will be the end of them all.[1]

The railway became one of the major influences on the "darkening" of the literary as well as the literal city as it "blackened," "distorted," and choked "the murky distance," producing "deformity of mind and body" (Dickens 1848:290-91). Unchecked and uncoordinated expansion, transport infrastructure, air pollution, and changing orders and rates of mobility all contributed to the opacity of the nineteenth-century city, and this environment extended to its inhabitants. At the beginning of the century Wordsworth lamented (1969:626-29):

[1] For an account of the impact of the railways on literary production and productions, see Picker 2003:15-40.

> How oft, amid those overflowing streets,
> Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
> Unto myself, "The face of every one
> That passes by me is a mystery."[2]

The urban crowd was simultaneously ubiquitous yet unreadable. As John Barton in Gaskell's *Mary Barton* walks the city streets (1996:63):

> he could not, you cannot read the lot of those who daily pass you by . . . . How do you know the wild romances of their lives; the trials, the temptations they are even now enduring, resisting, sinking under. You may be elbowed one instant by the girl desperate in her abandonment, laughing in mad merriment in her outward gesture, while her soul is longing for the rest of the dead, and bringing itself to think of the cold-flowing river as the only mercy of God remaining to her here. You may pass the criminal, meditating crimes at which you will tomorrow shudder with horror as you read them.

The fundamental link between all these aspects of the nineteenth-century city is that of disordered illegibility, a "loss of connection" (Williams 1973:150; see further 156-63). Various measures taken to open the city up to more effective surveillance in every sense, ranging from the installation of street lighting, through the reformation of a police force invested with greater powers in the monitoring of public conduct, to the demolition of dark, labyrinthine precincts to be replaced by visually open thoroughfares, described by Engels as "the method called Haussman" (cited in Berman 1983:158).[3] All these measures were associated with the formation and monitoring of political and class divisions, attempts at the regulation of urban life. Nonetheless, throughout the nineteenth century the city and its inhabitants remained for the most part obdurately unreadable texts, and as such provided a locus for literary inquiries into the inscrutability and unknowability of modern urban life, from Wordsworth at the turn of the century and Gaskell in 1848, to Dickens in 1853, conflating the fog of London with the image of chancery in the opening of *Bleak House* (1853:1):

> Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun . . . . Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.

And so on, the reiterated, inescapable fog for two pages, then modulating directly to the bureaucratic fog of the High Court of Chancery. Similarly, Coketown, based on Preston Lancashire, in *Hard Times* (2001:20-21):

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[2] *The Prelude* was composed over the years 1799-1805. All quotations are from the text of Wordsworth 1969. Due to the existence of multiple editions, line rather than page numbers are provided for reference.

[3] On the role of the police force, see Storch 1993:*passim*.

> a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work.

The coalescence of the visual impenetrability of the city, and of the lives of its occupants, is consolidated in Conrad's *The Secret Agent* from 1907. The idea of the city itself was central to the genesis of the novel, as he recalled, reflecting on recent anarchist violence in his Author's Note (1983:xxxvi):

> the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives. Irresistibly the town became the background for the ensuing period of deep and tentative meditations.

The dark, inexplicable collage of the window display in Verloc's shop, and the mysteriousness of its habitués, imply but never specify meaning and significance (3-5); the signage and numbering of the London Streets are misleading and arbitrary (14). The eponymous "Secret Agent" Verloc might, to the eye of a fellow pedestrian, "have been anything from a picture-frame maker to a locksmith" (13). It is precisely this appearance that deceives, that masks the reality of a homicidal terrorist.

The urban experience not only provided a motif of illegibility, but also generated narrative structures and strategies that came to characterize modernist literature. Through the trajectory from Wordsworth and Austen to T. S. Eliot and Joyce, the temporal and spatial fragmentation of the city nurtured the short story and the disruption of early nineteenth-century literary structures and rhythms. Raymond Williams argues that in the case of Dickens' work it produced "a new kind of novel" (1973:154). The hidden places of the city and its people increased a consciousness of potential criminalities, and its inscrutability came to require the Holmesian superhuman powers of observation and deduction on display in the power of the detective to "penetrate the intricacies of the streets" (227; see also 229). Both the dark places of the city and the illegibility of its crowds hid horrors from which the urban gothic, the dissociated "Jekyll and Hyde" sensibility, emerged. The city's shadowed geography dislodged visuality as a credible narrative mode, undermining the value of the eyewitness, the reader of events, the supposedly omniscient, reliable narrator. In one particular example of what has become known as the "unreliable narrator," we see two experiential modes in contention, one by virtue of its ineffectual presence, and the other conspicuous by its studied absence.

Edgar Allan Poe's characters Dupin and Legrand predate Doyle's Holmes as prototypes in detection fiction, and it is suggestive that the former made his debut in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" only months before "The Man of the Crowd," whose narrator demonstrates rather more ordinary and less analytical powers of observation.[4] As such, his account challenges the reliability and stability of point of view. Poe's attempt to engage with the city is also an early problematization of point of view, a growing preoccupation of prose writers trying to deal with a breakdown of centralized consensus, the projection of a wider range of voices and belief systems into the public space. The opening paragraph sets up the impression of the complacently omniscient author, a source of veracity. The narrator watches the crowd in the street through the window of a London coffee house and begins confidently to categorize people by class, according to their appearance. As night falls he sees an Old Man who seems not to fit his categories: "'How wild a history . . . is written in that bosom!' Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him" (Poe 1965:140). The narrator then follows him closely for a full twenty-four hours throughout the city, returning finally to the general reflection which opened the story: "'es lässt sich nicht lessen'—it does not permit itself to be read" (134, 145; repeated at the conclusion in explicit reference to the old man, this may be translated as "He does not permit himself to be read"). His illegibility is then taken as clear confirmation of his criminality. Hiding himself in the city crowds, the Old Man remains illegible, a metaphor of the city itself.

The story, however, is equally about the limits of reading—of scopism—as a way of engaging with the city. In realist prose narrative the narrator is traditionally a stable platform, a fixed and reliable point of view. Urban life increasingly displaces the omniscient, stable point of view, and renders everything and everyone impenetrably ambiguous. The narrator fails to take into account his own position and conduct. Consider the Old Man's point of view. He is in his sixties, obviously past his physical prime, short, thin, feeble, with clothes that are torn and dirty. He is walking the streets, minding his own business, until becoming aware that a man is following him closely and continuously for twenty-four hours. The follower wears an overcoat, a cane, rubber galoshes, and has a handkerchief covering his mouth (we, the readers, know he is recovering from an illness). The narrator in fact may reasonably be regarded as the cause of the behavior he cannot fathom. Pearlman (1998:141) explores the question: is this a story about "the narrator's pursuit of a stranger [or] . . . the stranger's flight from the narrator"? The narrator insists that the Old Man never saw him, but how credible can this be given the duration of the pursuit, sometimes "close at elbow" (Poe 1965:141), and the fact that for much of the time they are the only two people in the streets (see further Pearlman 1998:63-65). Perhaps the narrator, so confident of his secure position as an observer, is in fact deceived by his own surveillance. It certainly leaves him no better informed after twenty-four hours of close stalking.

What I want to add to Pearlman's inquiry is the conspicuous absence from this whole encounter of any attempt to communicate with each other by any means other than reading. Despite twenty-four hours of contact, sometimes within inches of each other, neither man speaks. Each remains a *silent* text. Finally, the narrator, "stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at

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[4] I wish to acknowledge with great appreciation my former undergraduate student Jonathan Pearlman, whose discussion established a starting point for my argument here. See Pearlman 1998:61-68.

him steadfastly in the face," and still, implausibly convinced he "noticed me not" (Poe 1965:145), decides that the Old Man will never be read. Or to put it another way, he decides that this man, to whom he has been close enough to talk for twenty-four hours, can never by any means be understood. The man has been for the most part silent, although the narrator is close enough to hear "a heavy sigh" and a "half shriek of joy" (143, 144). Apart from this, that the two of them should be in such proximity for so long and under such circumstances, without ever venturing to exchange one word of question or explanation, is extraordinary. The narrative follows a trajectory that makes excruciatingly obvious the absence of sonic contact, of finding an explanation simply through sounding and listening. The man of the crowd remains inexplicable because the encounter is wholly visual—an attempt to read each other.

Increasingly, the urban milieu discloses itself acoustically. Coketown is visually impenetrable, but clearly defined sonically by the sounds of the factories. The people in the streets cannot be read, but they can be heard. The contrast may be briefly exemplified in the case of William Wordsworth, whose lyrical enthusiasm about London as a silenced spectacle viewed in early morning from Westminster Bridge is turned into indignation and disgust when he becomes immersed in the "Babel din" of its crowds, the oppressive "roar," "deafening din," "thickening hubbub," and "uproar of the rabblement."[5] The city confronts Wordsworth with the rising tide of modern mass culture, the actuality of the contemporary "common man," and it is demonized as an acoustic culture (see further Johnson 2002:*passim*). Wordsworth gives us a prefiguration of that moral panic at the collapse of received and authorized order that we think of as the conservative response to twentieth-century mass culture. And, as with that response, it can be largely configured as a confrontation with a resurgent acoustic order. The shift from an inspirationally silent dawn prospect from Westminster Bridge to the noise of the streets corresponds to a shift to the increasing dynamic fluidity of the modern urban experience and class relations. Baudelaire's description of modern life as "floating existences" (cited in Berman 1983:144) and the imperative that the artist should "set up his house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of motion, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite" (145), recognizes that modern urban life requires a new language supple and subtle enough to render "leaps and jolts of consciousness" (148), and that modern life is fluid, in motion, evanescent, not a static text. The increasingly dynamic nature of the modern city is ill adapted to the static spatial readings of a pre-moving-image representational order. Only by so-to-speak getting the city to sit still and pose could Wordsworth render it as visual text, silently frozen in time. And that is only by falsifying it, sneaking a snapshot while everyone is asleep or out of frame. The city requires a processual mode of representation through the temporally grounded faculty of hearing, of sounding unfolding in time.

In 1913, the Futurist Luigi Russolo declared in *The Art of Noises* that in the nineteenth century "with the invention of machine, Noise was born" (1986:23). He invited his reader to (26):

[5] See "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1803"; then *The Prelude*, Book Seven, lines 178, 155, 211, 273.

> cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes. We will delight in distinguishing the eddying of water, of air or gas in metal pipes, the muttering of motors that breathe and pulse with an indisputable animality, the throbbing of valves, the bustle of pistons, the shrieks of mechanical saws, the starting of trams on the tracks, the cracking of whips, the flapping of awnings and flags. We will amuse ourselves by orchestrating together in our imagination the din of rolling shop shutters, the varied hubbub of train stations, ironworks, thread mills, printing presses, electrical plants, and subways.

Analyses of the city are predominantly modeled in terms of "spectacle" (see further Tonkiss 2003:303-4). I suggest as a supplementary and often competing trope that of the city as "oracle" or "auricle," as a site of meaning that is spoken and heard. Tonkiss notes that although Barthes wrote of the city as a "text," he also declared that it "speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it" (305). One of the distinguishing features of the material culture of urban modernity is the increased presence of sound. Cities have always been distinctively noisy, but the urban acoustic order from the nineteenth century is distinguished by, among other things, the proliferation of technologized sonorities and changing reverberative space**.** R. Murray Schafer's benchmark study, *The Tuning of the World*, included a review of the distinctive properties of the post-industrial soundscape (1977:69-99), and pointed to the explanatory potential of acoustically based cultural historiography. The approach has been applied to studies of modern urban culture, such as those of Bruce Smith (1999) and John Picker (2003). Picker notes the changing acoustic profile of the nineteenth century and its complicity in class formation: "Victoria's reign had been marked by an increasing volume and an increased awareness of sound—from the shriek and roar of the railway to the jarring commotion of urban streets, and from the restrained tinkling of the drawing-room piano to the hushed propriety of the middle-class parlour" (111). Sounding and hearing thus became increasingly significant in nineteenth-century urban life: "the development of Victorian self-awareness was contingent on awareness of sonic environments, and that, in turn, to understand how Victorians saw themselves, we ought to understand how they heard themselves as well" (11). Picker's magisterial investigation of Victorian soundscapes refers also to the work of Dickens and of George Eliot (15-40, 82-109), disclosing how the latter "recognized the advent of an age defined by new emphases on and understandings of the capacity for listening" (83).

My interest here is in the particular relationship between visual and acoustic modes in nineteenth-century literary representations of the city. Visually the city is chaotic, labyrinthine, and threateningly indecipherable; full of the faces of strangers, opaque windows, and blind alleys, it resists communality. Sonically of course it is also likely to be thought of as pandemonium and babel, particularly by those whose cultural capital lies in the printed text and other scopocentric epistemologies. But the city is sonically communal in the sense that its sounds construct a sense of shared life. Sound is the medium of the flood of collectivity (see further Johnson and Cloonan 2008). It is this shared life that the intellectuals and the middle classes resist, since it breaks down the class and professional segregations by which they differentiate themselves in an increasingly congested and visually undiscriminated mass. Sound defies the privacy and separation that can be sustained visually. It does not respect the class-based segmentation of space. Unregulated urban noise announces mass culture, culture losing its older

internal demarcations by which class and privilege are defined and preserved through literacy and the literary text (see further Johnson 2006:*passim*).

The literary record of urban experience in the nineteenth century is pervaded by the noise (most often disagreeable) of the modern city, "the noise of people, and bells, and horns; the whiz and scream of the arriving trains" (Gaskell 1996:283).[6] It is a condition of life and a marker of the confrontations that define the modern condition, confrontations across a range of boundaries including those of class, gender, and nation. This was not simply the traditional sounds of the city rising in volume. The nineteenth-century soundscape became more heterogeneous, complex, information-rich, and introduced new kinds of experience to the sonic imaginary. These included the sounds of the unprecedentedly rapid motion of engine components, flatline sounds, the Doppler effect, and the disembodied sounds from telephones and sound recordings, which also preserved the voices of the dead (see for example Schafer 1977:78-80, 89).

I conclude by referring to a particular trope for the auralization of the nineteenth-century city, a point of convergence for all the issues raised here—sound, class, information inundation, the mobility and pace of life, and their literary representation. That trope is the typewriter, one of the new information technologies that were developed to cope with the increase in the level and complexity of information traffic in an urbanized capitalist economy. These became elements in new literary scenarios in which technologized sonority and sonic technologies played a central role in the elaboration of theme, setting, narratologies, as well as the development of personal and professional relationships. In particular, they transformed the way in which the workplace was imagined, specifically that massively expanding sector in which information was processed and disseminated. Like other changes in information processing, storage, and dissemination (telephone and dictaphone), the shorthand typist functioned in an acoustically active environment. Listening to a voice (increasingly on a dictaphone), she transcribed in a phonetically based shorthand, then copied it longhand on a typewriter, which proclaimed its productive activity sonically. This labor replaced that of the (usually male) scrivener working in a relatively silent office space that was the modern equivalent of a study in which "silence is golden."

Until the "aural renaissance" of the late nineteenth century, the sign of productivity and self-improvement was silence, providing a background for the definition of character and power relations. In Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" the silence of the workplace is essential to the narrative impetus. Bartleby is a scrivener who comes to work for a law firm. All that can be heard normally is the scrape of pen on paper and, from time to time, proofreading of a document while another follows the copy "closely written in a crimpy hand" (Melville 1987:20).

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[6] Williams 1973 is a provocative inquiry into changes in the "way of seeing" (226) in the urban consciousness, by which he means the way of knowing and of representing. For the most part, his literary citations consolidate the argument about the increasing illegibility of the city, yet it is striking how often they collaterally illustrate the argument I am making here about sound. While this point does not escape his attention, my argument, however, is that to continue modeling these changes as "ways of seeing" is to miss a deeper shift towards an acoustic epistemology, what Steven Feld (1994) calls "acoustemology." We cannot find our bearings in the modern city by just looking because it cannot be comprehended visually. We know the city largely by hearing it, especially since the revolutions in media and information technologies from the late nineteenth century. The deeply internalized metaphor itself, "ways of seeing," is an impediment to the understanding of modern urban experience and its forms of representation.

Noise is a disruption of the ambience of productivity. The most valued employee has one flaw. His work in the mornings is exemplary, but lunchtime tippling often makes him "rather noisy" (15):

> He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up, and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner.

During these afternoon improprieties he was also "apt to be rash with his tongue, in fact insolent" (16). Another employee broke the silence by audibly grinding his teeth "over mistakes committed in copying, [also] unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken, in the heat of business; and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked" (16):

> amid the stillness of my chambers, Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor, as if the table were a perverse, voluntary agent, intent on thwarting and vexing him (18).

Another's indulgence in ginger-nut cakes produced "the crunching of the crisp particles in his mouth" (19). These are all irritations because they break the silence that proclaims conscientious labor.

The new recruit is given a workplace behind a screen, so that his employer (the story's narrator) "might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice" (19). The newcomer initially proves a most diligent copyist, but on his third day Bartleby is called to proofread a short document. Without emerging from behind the screen, he replies, "I would prefer not to" (20). The narrator sits for a while "in perfect silence," incredulous, wondering if his ears had "deceived" him (20). The rest of the narrative concerns attempts to persuade Bartleby to perform his duties—attempts that are increasingly refused. In a provocative mood, the narrator asks Bartleby to check to see if there is any mail waiting at the Post Office (25):

> "I would prefer not to."
> "You *will* not?"
> "I *prefer* not."

The narrator grows reconciled to this impasse, in view of Bartleby's "steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry (except when he chose to throw himself into a standing revery [*sic*] behind his screen), his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances" (25-26). Bartleby discloses nothing of himself, having "declined telling who he was, or whence he came" (28). Finally, discovering that the "unaccountable Bartleby" (37) has taken to living in the office, the employer gives him notice, to no effect. The narrator is then forced to move his chambers, since the scrivener will not quit them. He later

discovers that having been turned out of the chambers by the incoming occupants, Bartleby now haunts the building (40) and is finally arrested for vagrancy. When the narrator visits him in prison Bartleby keeps his back to him but recognizes him by his voice. “I know you . . . and I want nothing to say to you” (43). On a subsequent visit the narrator is directed to the prisoner who appears to be sleeping in the prison yard but in fact is dead.

Like Poe’s Man of the Crowd, Bartleby is illegible (13):

> While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case they are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.

That “report” “was a rumor that he had been a clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington until removed by a new administration” (45):

> Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling those dead letters, and assorting them for the flames? For by the cart-load they are annually burned. Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, molders in the grave; a bank-note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved circumstances. On errands of life these letters speed to death. Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!

The vanity of this teeming secular life—its records, files, and communications—is reduced to ashes. The modern city and its information, its bureaucracy, proliferate infinitely yet pointlessly. Bartleby is ultimately driven through the informational looking glass to the other side of babble: silence, non-information, non-explanation. Bartleby succumbs to the weight of information that is both profoundly important and useless. The Dead Letter Office is a kind of “final solution,” an all-consuming furnace that reduces the infinite variety of hope, endeavor, and expectation that constitutes human experience to featureless ashes. Bartleby’s response to his epoch is withdrawal, silence, death, a foreshadowing of the approaching extinction of his species. The silent scrivener will be overwhelmed by the avalanche of information spilling out of the modern city, himself one of its “dead letters.” Ambient silence and his concealment behind a screen are essential to the unfolding of this narrative. It is difficult to imagine how he could effectively present his mysterious protest in the noisy open-plan offices emerging from the late nineteenth century. In any case, for reasons including temperament, professional competencies, and gender, it is highly unlikely that he would have become employed there anyway. The sensibility that replaces him will be accompanied by different skills, aspirations, and expectations, and is likely to revel in the milieu of the urban masses and cheerfully embrace its benefits, to the disdain and alarm of intellectuals (Carey 1992:*passim*). The male scrivener who laboriously traces each

separate and distinctive letter in silence will be replaced by the "typewriter girl," rapidly processing information through the standardized typefaces and keys of a clattering typewriter.

The noise of the typewriter became the new trope of busyness, or business, because, like the sound recording, it came into being for stenographic purposes (see further Johnson 2003). No scribal hand could keep up with the information explosion and its technologies, but a typewriter could. Sound and sounding technologies transformed power relations. The breaking of the link between scribal silence and the movement of commercial information completely inverted the gender profile of the "keeper of the secrets": the secretary. You didn't need a good writing hand to use a typewriter, so the erratic literacy of the enormous female labor pool was not an issue. In 1870, only 4.5 percent of stenographers and typists in the United States were women. By 1930, the figure was 95.6 percent (Kittler 1999:184). The gendering of this technology was so powerful that the word "typewriter" referred interchangeably to the woman and to the machine.

The politics of the connection are reflected in the 1897 novel *The Type-writer Girl* by Grant Allen, writing under the name Olive Pratt Rayner. Unlike the increasingly silent Bartleby, whose employer speaks to us on his behalf, Juliet the typewriter girl speaks to us with buoyant extroverted directness. Like Bartleby, Juliet works in a legal office. However, this is a defiant modern woman: "I am all for the absolute equation of the sexes" (Allen 2004:53). In the bold celebrative spirit of Baudelaire (Williams 1973:234-35), she cheerfully embraces her milieu, and the mystery of the masses is a stimulant, not a depressant (Allen 2004:23):

> how can I cruise down the Strand without encountering strange barks—mysterious argosies that attract and intrigue me? That living stream is so marvelous! Whence come they, these shadows, and whither do they go?—innumerable, silent, each wrapped in his own thought, yet each real to himself as I to my heart. To me they are shooting stars, phantoms that flash athwart the orbit of my life one second, and then vanish. But to themselves they are the centre of a world—of *the* world, and I am but one of the meteors that dart across their horizon. . . . I cannot choose but wonder who each is, and why he is here. For one after another I invent a story. It may not be the true story, but at least it amuses me.

She is brought into being by the age of the machine, of urban mass culture, and this is signaled by the sonic environment in her workplace. While Bartleby drudged in impassive silence, her world is one of noise. The two clerks with whom she shares the office talk endlessly about horses, football, and ladies of the music hall. And in this environment her own identity is differentiated and her value is confirmed and defined not through silence but through noise. She took shorthand, then typed it out in her anteroom workplace "where I clicked" (33). She is her technology, its sound is her sound; it is the sound of the typewriter that counterbalances the idle chatter of her male colleagues with the proclamation of her value (34):

> As their tongues rippled on, with peculiar London variants on the vowels of our native language, my type-writer continued to go click, click, click, till I was grateful for its sound as a counter-irritant to their inanity. . . . That click, click, click became to me like music—if only because it drowned the details of the Lewes Spring Meeting. . . . I continued to click, click, click, like a

> machine that I was, and to listen as little as possible to the calculated odds for King Arthur for the Ascot Cup.

When, like Bartleby, she prefers to do no more work, far from withdrawing into the kind of nullity that overtook him in his paralyzed immurement in the workplace, her response is escape and independence. The instrument of that escape is one of the nineteenth-century technologies that brought mobility to the proliferating urban workforce: she sets out on her bicycle (42-43):

> How light and free I felt! When man first set woman on two wheels with a pair of pedals, did he know, I wonder that he had rent the veil of the harem in twin? I doubt it, but so it was. A woman on a bicycle has all the world before her where to choose; she can go where she will, no man hindering.

She thinks of herself as owning large estates, tax-free, the streams, the sky, the wild-life: "All these I own, by virtue of my freehold in the saddle of my bicycle" (109). The triumph of the typewriter-girl is a triumph of the woman, the machine, and of what Baudelaire, speaking of America, called "volubility" (1952:123), an open embrace of modernity and the emancipative possibilities of mass culture.

The sound of the keyboard would become one of the metaphors of the information industry in film and even in music, as in the sonic anaphones used by many news programs.[7] The sound of the typewriter, rather than the silence of the scriptorium and library, became the trope of the production and circulation of knowledge. These new information technologies and the world with which they engaged both provided and even constituted a new "language" for the description of urban modernity. In "Paris Spleen," Baudelaire insists that modern urban life requires a new language supple and subtle enough to render "leaps and jolts of consciousness" (cited in Berman 1983:148), a language and a medium to express constant displacement and dislocation. This consciousness required the suppleness of sound, registering the dynamic of urban modernity to accommodate its plasticity. The continuity and enveloping flood of noise provided a counterpoint to the fragmented, visual collage of the modern city. Modernist literature pushed against the limits of static textuality to lay hold on the experience, anticipating in the fragmented collages of Eliot and Joyce the medium that would become the dominant expressive form for the modern city.

It was the moving sound image, its balancing of what is seen with what is heard, that standardized the twentieth-century trope of productivity and information circulation. That is, the movie office-space scene filled with the sound of typewriters generating urgent bulletins and dispatches. The transition I have been describing led to a narratology that was most fully realized in film, with its constantly shifting camera points of view, its rapid editing, and its deployment of sound. In the 1959 film *The Battle of the Sexes*, based on a story by the (near-blind) James Thurber, an American efficiency expert (actress Constance Cummings) arrives at McPherson's, a Scottish company dealing in hand-woven fabric. She attempts to rationalize the business, to the chagrin of the accountant (actor Peter Sellers). The two become locked in the eponymous battle,

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[7] On "sonic anaphones" see Tagg and Clarida 2003:99-101.

which is also a battle over modernization. His weapons are impassive taciturnity and tradition. Her weapons are volubility and the technology of mass modernity, the sonorous technology of keyboards, Dictaphones, and intercoms. She begins by technologizing the accounting department. Hitherto, the efficiency of its operations was signaled through scribal silence in which even the sound of a worn scratchy pen on paper was an intrusion on the silence of concentrated labor. The transition to a "modern" workplace is signaled in what might have taken a silent page in a novel several paragraphs to recount. Film presents without explanatory commentary a time-lapse narrative of the gender and technology shift from Melville to Allen/Rayner. Here, it is completed in a few seconds' expressive collage of technologized cacophony: the tapping of adding machines and the buzz of intercoms. The sound of silence has been replaced by a site of sound.

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