CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AURAL ANXIETIES
AND THE ADVENT OF
MODERNITY

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THE AGE OF STETHOSCOPY

This chapter seeks to trace nineteenth-century aurality as it became newly urbanized, industrialized, and commercialized, that is to say, newly modern. Traditional overviews of the Victorian period typically ignored the ways that sound shaped individuals and communities, and how responses to it articulated Victorian concerns over identity and self-definition. Yet important work from at least the late 1990s by social and cultural historians such as Peter Bailey and Steven Connor has made it harder to continue to marginalize the value of attending to Victorian soundscapes (Bailey 1998; Connor 1997, 2000). Over the course of the nineteenth century, the well-documented professionalization of the listener – in medicine, in music, in communications media – accompanied attempts to hear more, and listen more closely, than ever before (Sterne 2003). The invention of the phonograph in 1877 was in a sense the culmination of the Victorians’ impulse to archive, analyze, and manipulate the sonic experiences that their era was making more rich and complex.

If the phonograph is an end point, then modern aurality begins with the stethoscope. By rendering corporeal listening into the basis of medical diagnoses, by establishing in its basic design a clinical distance between doctor and patient, the stethoscope represented the rational conquest of previously undetected sound and led to the rise of the clinically skilled listener. Yet such a development had a more problematic aspect, creating an environment in which newly amplified sound demanded attention and could become impossible to ignore. Mediate auscultation, the technical term for the sounding of the body with the stethoscope, had an obvious impact on trained medical professionals, of course: as Stanley Joel Reiser has written: ‘The effects of the stethoscope on physicians were analogous to the effects of printing on Western culture’ (Reiser 1978: 38). But beyond its effects on medical practice, the use of the stethoscope can be understood as a valorization of the broader cultural phenomenon of intense close listening. Nineteenth-century literary sources reveal the ways that this condition created in Britain and America new kinds of hypersensitive hearers and new manifestations of anxiety concerning Victorian identity.
Although the stethoscope was invented by Laennec in 1816, it only gradually gained acceptance in Britain and America over the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The controversy that it generated is suggested by the sceptical comments of the later physician to Queen Victoria, John Forbes, in the preface to his heavily abridged English translation (1821) of Laennec’s treatise De l’auscultation médiate:

It must be confessed that there is something even ludicrous in the picture of a grave physician formally listening through a long tube applied to the patient’s thorax, as if the disease within were a living being that could communicate its condition to the sense without. Besides, there is in this method a sort of bold claim and pretension to certainty and precision of diagnosis, which, at first sight, but be somewhat startling to a mind deeply versed in the knowledge and uncertainties of our art, and to the calm and cautious habits of philosophising to which the English Physician is accustomed. On all these accounts, and others that might be mentioned, I conclude, that the new method will only in a few cases be speedily adopted, and never generally.

(Forbes 1821: xix)

For all Forbes’s discomfort with mediate auscultation, his translation sold out the 500 copies of its initial printing within two years, went through four editions through 1834, and was critical in facilitating the general adoption of Laennec’s stethoscope and technique across the English-speaking world (Duffin 1998: 213).

Forbes hints in his preface at the kinds of professional and corporeal anxieties that the stethoscope provoked, but for a perspective on the greater implications of this new form of close listening on the individual psyche and the culture at large, we might turn to the works of two masters of nineteenth-century fiction who admittedly make for an unlikely pair: Edgar Allan Poe and George Eliot. Poe’s story, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840), with its emphasis on physiognomy and problematic vision, has often been read as a commentary on the new sensory anxieties brought about by the age of photography, although, as James Lastra observes, the story also less prominently registers the soundtrack of the modern city (Lastra 2000: 1-3). I want to suggest that Poe’s ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’, published three years later, is the louder double of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ in its obsession with the inescapable aurality of modernity, and forms a parallel commentary on the troubling repercussions of what also should be called the age of stethoscope. ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ is, simply put, a remarkably noisy story. Indeed, in his first try at publishing it, Poe received a rejection that in more senses than one recommended turning it down: ‘If Mr. Poe would condescend to furnish more quiet articles’, it read, ‘he would be a most desirable correspondent’ (Poe 1843: 791). Needless to say, Poe ignored the advice.

The narrator of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ is, of course, a homicidal maniac who murders an old man and buries the corpse beneath the floor of his room. The narrator’s ‘disease’, he tells us, ‘had sharpened my senses – not destroyed – not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell’ (Poe 1843: 792). Significantly, the murder is instigated by the narrator’s desire to escape the stare of the old man’s
‘pale blue eye, with a film over it’: ‘Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so, by degrees – very gradually – I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever’ (Poe 1843: 792). Poe highlights the anxiety produced by both the photographic ‘film’ and eye that leads to the murder, and the stethoscopic beating that leads to his narrator’s undoing. The police arrive, and as he talks to them, the narrator hears ‘a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton’ (indeed, it may even be a watch, as some critics have speculated, though the story does not say). The sound persists: ‘It grew louder – louder – louder! ... hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!’ – Until it forces his admission of guilt: ‘I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!’ (Poe 1843: 797).

The punning imperative at the end of the story to ‘hear, hear’ the heartbeats that are amplified for the narrator alone suggests that the ‘disease’ he suffers from is an auscultative pathology, a telltale symptom of stethoscopic modernity. Not content merely to dramatize this condition, Poe mocks the newfound power of the amplification of hidden bodily sound: in the story, the one who hears so acutely is a murderer, and his ‘patient’ is his victim. For a more sustained, less gothic, but in some ways equally worried consideration of the sociocultural impact of the stethoscope, however, we could hardly do better than to turn our ear to George Eliot.

Eliot uses an acute sense of hearing as her governing metaphor for the sympathetic connections among people that is her work’s central project to encourage. A stethoscope appears early on, in ‘Janet’s Repentance’, one of the stories in her first published book of fiction, Scenes of Clerical Life, from 1857. In this story, set in the early 1830s, the instrument reveals Edgar Tryan’s internal deterioration from overwork as an evangelical preacher: ‘It was not necessary or desirable to tell Mr. Tryan what was revealed by the stethoscope, but Janet knew the worst’ (Eliot 1857: 331). Throughout her subsequent novels, and in the wake of Laennec’s medical revolution, Eliot will elaborate upon the kind of stethoscopic perception that permits the attentive individual to access the invisible lives of others. Indeed, this is already articulated in ‘Janet’s Repentance’: ‘Surely, surely, the only true knowledge of our fellow-man is that which enables us to feel with him – which gives us a fine ear for the heart-pulses that are beating under the mere clothes of circumstance and opinion’ (Eliot 1857: 257).

Eliot’s fiction is full of hidden hearts beating for those perceptive men and women who would hear them. As she memorably put it in Middlemarch (1871–72) – in which a stethoscope also makes an appearance – ‘if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence’ (Eliot 1871–72: 189). This is not an empty metaphor (few in Eliot are) but one rich with sonic associations. Behind it stand not only Eliot’s familiarity with Laennec (who is mentioned in Middlemarch as a potential model for the ambitious physician Tertius Lydgate), but also her knowledge of the writings of Helmholtz. Helmholtz began his work on sound in 1856, the year Eliot began writing fiction, and he delivered his important lecture ‘The Physiological Causes of Harmony in Music’, in which he explicated his resonance theory of hearing, in 1857, the year Scenes of Clerical Life was serialized in Blackwood’s Magazine. Eliot and her common-law husband George Henry Lewes owned German and
French editions of Helmholtz's acoustics magnum opus *Die Lehre von der Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik* (1863), and shortly before beginning *Middlemarch*, Eliot noted that she was reading Helmholtz on music. Helmholtz's theory of sympathetic resonance, which explained how the ear, as a kind of 'nervous piano', was able to perceive musical notes, itself sympathetically resonated with Eliot's aesthetic project to dramatize the varieties of close listening through which her characters, and by extension her readers, develop compassion and affinity (Picker 2003: 82–109).

The anxiety in Eliot's final novel, however, is the burden of the stethoscopic age: that of hearing too much and too well. Written on the other side of *Middlemarch*, *Daniel Deronda* (1876) is not only Eliot's most musically invested novel but also a novel about choice. In this era of close listening, when there is so much that is new to hear, to what and whom should one listen? This is the year that the telephone was invented, after all (see Figure 34.1), and Eliot's most challenging, experimental book, like Alexander Graham Bell's device, is about learning how to answer the call, and indeed, which call to answer. Eliot's eponymous hero discovers his calling in the words of Mordecai, the consumptive visionary who guides Deronda toward a proto-Zionist quest for a Jewish homeland, which in turn denies him the more conventional expectation of a future with the widowed

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**TRICKS OF THE TELEPHONE.**

The instrument for long-distance conversation, and by means of which music is laid on to every house.

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Figure 34.1  Speculations about the telephone, from *Funny Folks* 3 (16 June 1877): 85 with kind permission from the British Library
Gwendolen Harleth Grandcourt, with whom he has a powerful psychological relationship. Bell and Eliot shared an interest in Helmholtzian acoustics: the technology of the telephone is premised, as is Eliot's fiction, on a broad application of the principle of sympathetic resonance. Two years after Deronda, Eliot attended a private demonstration of the telephone during its debut in England, marvelled at its utility, and went on to incorporate the new terminology into her prose. In the opening of a late historical novel left unfinished at her death, Eliot aligns her writing endeavour with the new mode of communications she called 'telephonic converse': 'It is a telescope you may look through a telephone you may put your ear to' (Eliot 1954–78: 7.28; Baker 1980: 10). For the author who for so long had urged closer listening to others, how apposite, then, that her fictional enterprise reached an endpoint suspended on a telephone line.

**LONDON’S DIN**

For Eliot, the lesson of stethoscopic modernity is that to live the most outwardly attuned life one has to make choices about where to direct one's attention, that is, one must learn to listen selectively. Such a solution eluded many of her contemporaries who could not help but hear too much of their increasingly distracting urban environment. George Augustus Sala leads off the tenth volume of Charles Dickens's *Household Words* with a passage that expounds upon the noisy soundtrack of mid-Victorian London streets:

Still must I hear! Shall the hoarse peripatetic ballad-singer bawl the cracking couplets of The Low-backed Car beneath my window; shall the summer breeze waft the strains of Pop Goes the Weasel upon my ears, and drive me to confusion, while I am endeavouring to master the difficulties of the Turkish alphabet; shall the passing butcherboy rattle his bones, and the theological beggar-man torture a psalm tune into dolorous cadences; shall the young lady in the apartment next to mine string my nerves into the rigours, while she is practising Les Souvenirs de Cracovie, with that ceaseless verbal accompaniment of one, and two, and three; one, and two, and three! Shall music in some shape or other resound from the distant costermonger and the proximate street boy; the brooding swallows sitting upon the eaves, and showing me their sunny backs; the ill-ground organ in the next street; and the beaten tom-tom and execrable caterwauling of Howadjee Lall from Bombay! To say nothing of the deep-mouthed dog next door; the parrot at number eight which is always endeavouring to whistle Il Segretto, and always trying back, and never succeeds in accomplishing more of the air than the first three-quarters of a bar; and Colonel Chumpfist’s man servant over the way, who sings valorously while he cleans his master's boots in the area! Shall all these things be, and I not sing, lest haply my readers think they have already had enough and to spare, of my musical reminiscences!

(Sala 1854: 1)

This is a good example of what I would call the language of stethoscopic Victorians. Sala’s anxious ear takes in many of the ‘musical’ disturbances that posed a special
threat to the segment of Victorian middle-class professionals, including Dickens, whose living and working spaces overlapped. How could this emerging class of brain workers support themselves and their families if their efforts were constantly interrupted by the sounds of the streets? Perhaps the most ready, though not very satisfying, answer was to do as Sala did here and make the subject of one’s work the noise itself, turning a disturbance to professional labour into fodder for that labour.

A much different answer was provided by Thomas Carlyle, whose stethoscopic language as early as Sartor Resartus (1833–34) predicted and likely influenced Eliot’s in Middlemarch. As he wrote in Sartor: ‘O thou philosophic Teufelsdröckh, that listenest while others only gabble, and with thy quick tympanum hearest the grass grow!’ (Carlyle 1838: 252). Carlyle was known to hold forth loudly, as it were, on the value of silence: ‘SILENCE, SILENCE: in a thousand senses I proclaim the indispensable worth of Silence, our only safe dwelling-place often’, he wrote to Geraldine Jewsbury in 1840 (Carlyle 2007). In 1853, after years of infuriation by city noises of all kinds, especially the ‘demon fowls’ of neighbours, Carlyle resolved to create a space for silence at the top of his house. In September he confessed to Ralph Waldo Emerson: ‘I had for 12 years had such a soundproof inaccessible Apartment schemed out in my head; and last year, under a poor helpless builder, had finally given it up: but Chelsea, as London generally, swelling out as if it were mad, grows every year noisier; a good builder turned up, and with a last paroxysm of enthusiasm, I set him to. My notion is, he will succeed; in which case, it will be a great possession to me for the rest of my life’ (Carlyle 2007).

Carlyle’s soundproof study in part grew out of his insecurity over his ambiguously gendered professional status as a home-based mental, as opposed to physical labourer – or as he put it in an 1853 letter to his wife Jane, the ‘unprotected man’ (Carlyle 2007). The silent room was a way for the author to claim territory domestically and sonically for so-called ‘strenuously idle’ masculinity. Carlyle’s complicated relationship with Victorian notions of gender and professionalism was fundamentally irresolvable, and it should not be a surprise that his silent fantasy could not be realized. As he put it in 1854: ‘The room considered as a soundless apartment may be safely pronounced an evident failure: I do hear all manner of sharp noises, – much reduced in intensity, but still perfectly audible’ (Carlyle 2007).

The stethoscopic anxieties Carlyle experienced would reach their apex a decade or so later, when he, Dickens, and their peers petitioned in support of the 1864 Street Music Act. This legislation attempted (as with Carlyle’s soundproof study, with limited success) to crack down on the growing number of organ grinders and the other working poor, mostly foreign musicians whose unpredictable soundings clashed with the quiet on which middle-class English male literary and artistic labour depended. The Street Music Act was introduced by MP Michael T. Bass, who published a collection titled Street Music in the Metropolis to coincide with the parliamentary debate on his bill. In the preface to the volume, Bass indicates that a widely expressed need for orderly quiet led him to publication:

I have received letters from persons of all classes expressing their gratitude to me for taking up this question, and urging me to persevere. . . . Nothing but a careful perusal of their letters could convey the anxiety felt by so many persons
for some effectual check to the daily increasing grievance of organ-grinders and street music.

(Bass 1864: v–vi)

The ‘anxiety’ Bass senses turns out to be, as his book goes on to demonstrate, not exclusively but notably, that middle-class professionals, especially those, like Carlyle, who laboured in their homes.

To understand what makes their allegations distinctive, consider for a moment this more conventional complaint from one Victor Baune, a City worker who lived on Philpot Lane:

I go home from the City, the brain overwrought, feverish, and fatigued, and I require rest and change of occupation – reading, writing, music – and these are impossible with the horrible street music from all sides – the very atmosphere impregnated with that thrice-cursed droning noise – that abomination of London which makes me ill, which positively shortens my life from the nervous fever which it engenders.

(Bass 1864: 8–9)

While engaging with widespread Victorian notions of invalidism, Baune’s horror at street music derives from a sense of entitlement and expectation in the domestic sphere. The ‘change of occupation’ he describes plays on the dual sense of ‘occupation’: as career and of space. For Baune, as for those in other established middle-class professions such as medicine and law, work and rest occupy different spaces.

Such a spatial distinction did not apply to the writers, artists, and other brainworkers who laboured in their homes. This made the aural anxieties they derived from street noise all the more intense (Picker 2003: 41–81). Chief among the aggrieved was John Leech, the Punch cartoonist so afflicted by organ grinding and other street music ‘nuisances’ that he met an early death ostensibly by them. Leech took frequent jabs at the organ men in his pictures of life and character. A representative example (Figure 34.2) responds to Lord Wilton’s opinion of the street organ as an ‘agreeable relief’ by presenting him as contentedly listening, not on the street but indoors and at his hearth, to one of Leech’s typically seedy looking organ grinders. The accompanying text reads: ‘We have no doubt that the same taste and intelligence, which enables the noble Earl to enjoy this exquisite noise would also allow him to eat scraped slate pencil, by way of variety to his ordinary meals’. This image unites two sentiments common enough to Leech’s circle and the burgeoning Victorian intellectual and aesthetic elite they represented: an aural anxiety borne of middle-class resentment against aristocratic privilege, on the one hand, and immigrants, itinerants, and the working poor, on the other.

Dickens’s close friendship with Leech was the likely motivation for the novelist’s petition in support of Bass’s bill. This document, which Bass published in his book, was signed by a roster of Victorian writers and artists including Carlyle, Tennyson, William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, Dickens, and Leech, and attacked the disturbances wrought by ‘brazen performers on brazen instruments, beaters of drums, grinders of organs, bangers of banjos, clashers of cymbals, worriers of fiddles, and bellowers of ballads’ (Bass 1864: 41). Dickens’s attitude toward organ grinders
worked its timely way into his contribution to the 1863 Christmas number of All The Year Round, ‘Mrs Lirriper’s Lodgings’. In terms that evoke the expansive behaviour Leech frequently illustrated in his Punch efforts, the landlady Lirriper recounts the defensive tactics used by her boarder Major Jemmy Jackson:

when it got about among the organ-men that quiet was our object ... he made lion and tiger war upon them to that degree without seeing it I could not have believed it was in any gentleman to have such a power of bursting out with fire-irons walking-sticks water-jugs coals potatoes off his table the very hat off his head, and at the same time so furious in foreign languages that they would stand with their handles half turned fixed like the Sleeping Ugly – for I cannot say Beauty. (Dickens 1863: 515–16)

In this fight, Dickens and his fellow home labourers were taking up not only Leech’s cause, but also that of mathematician and computer pioneer Charles Babbage. As much as Leech did, Babbage made the war against street music in Victorian London into a personal cause célèbre. (In fact, Leech was sympathetic to Babbage’s battle: the well-dressed, older, and agitated gentleman surrounded by street musicians in his ‘The Quiet Street – A Sketch from a Study Window’, the coloured frontispiece for the Punch’s Pocket Book for 1856, is clearly based on Babbage.) A representative recollection of an associate conveys the extent of Babbage’s efforts and notoriety:
I remember one day Mr. Babbage came down to Richmond quite in low spirits at the persecution he had received regarding the organs, etc., and I was much shocked to find when I called on some friends in Manchester Square, that there was a subscription started to encourage the organs to worry him! He told me with a dismal face that one day when he was walking in the city and just going to cross a street, a pretty little girl cried out ‘There goes old Babbage!’ He was then engaged in five actions about the brass bands, and organs, and he was in correspondence with Sir Richard Mayne, and the Home Office, for power to suppress them.

(Lloyd 1880: 65)

Bass’s Act, which passed with the strong support of Babbage in addition to Carlyle, Dickens, and their cohort, in the end did little to curtail street noises in any significant way, but it had the symbolic value of uniting this body of professionals in a territorial defence motivated by the threat of invasive sound. Such a seemingly trivial, comic conflict as the street music debate reveals the anxieties felt by (principally though not exclusively male) Victorian Londoners about the value of intellectual and aesthetic labour, the meaning of ‘music’, and more generally, the viability of middle-class masculinity in urban modernity.

DEAD RECORDS

With the invention of the phonograph in the last quarter of the century, new forms of mechanical music would fully invade the Victorian home and provoke new anxieties. The original intent of the phonograph, however, had been to record and replay not music, but the spoken word. Like the roughly parallel technology of the telephone, the phonograph was meant as a communications device, with serious implications for the reach of language and speech. Yet ‘[i]t sounds more like the devil every time’, as one listener had put it at an early demonstration, signalling the then commonplace notion that the machine was possessed by a (likely sinister) force from beyond (Conot 1979: 109). To the extent that the sound of the voice was identified with a speaking body, to listen to the phonograph was a further application of the Victorian invention of binaural stethoscopy, by which I mean listening with both ears to the sounds of the body. Yet in this case ‘the body’, fixed on cylinder as voice, had become a new kind of remnant and reminder of the physical presence of the speaker. If Helmholtz had managed to disenchant the sound of the voice by delineating the components of tone and the elements of hearing, users of the fin-de-siècle phonograph succeeded in re-enchanting the voice as a mystical sound from beyond the grave.

From as early as 1878, shortly after he invented the phonograph, Thomas Edison publicly expressed his hopes to persuade celebrities around the globe to make records for him that would constitute an uncanny archive, what would come to be called a ‘Library of Voices’. The person who would attempt to realize Edison’s archival project was Colonel George E. Gouraud, his principal overseas agent, who had played a major role in the European introduction of his telephone and lighting system, and who became the most vocal phonograph enthusiast in Britain. Gouraud would go on to record, or at least attempt to record, a wide range of Victorians
for posterity, including the likes of Arthur Sullivan, Florence Nightingale, Henry Morton Stanley, Wilkie Collins, and many others (Read and Welch 1976: 137; Picker 2003: 110–26). Gouraud himself was a native New Yorker and decorated Civil War veteran described by a later acquaintance in these words:

Gouraud is a man of majestic stature and grandeur. He does not go; he proceeds. He wears his white hair long, down on his shoulders. His mustachios are twisted, and stick out fiercely, at irregular right angles from his lips. His eyes are not in tune. He wears a costume which, with his long hair, makes him look like Buffalo Bill gone stark, staring mad... If he ever writes a book, the title ought to be EMPERORS WHO HAVE MET ME.

(Lindsay 1997: 229)

When it came to the phonograph, the Victorian scientific impulse to render sound material mingled with the concurrent fascination with spiritualism, hauntings, and the culture of death, which played out in a distinctive way with the afterlife of a recording of the deceased that was intended for Edison’s Library of Voices. This record, the earliest of a major literary figure, testifies to the anxious self-consciousness the phonograph often provoked. The record originated during an 1889 dinner party attended by Robert Browning and Gouraud, after which Gouraud directed Browning, who was known to object to public speaking, to talk into the phonograph. Browning began to recite his ‘How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix’, but doesn’t get very far:

[Gouraud:] My dear Edison, my dear Edison. I have sent you by the means of the phonograph several interesting souvenirs of its brief residence in London. Nothing that I have sent you will be more welcome to you than the words which will follow now – words that are none other than those of one of England’s – I may say, of one of England and America’s most distinguished poets: those of Robert Browning. Now listen to his voice.

[Browning:] I sprang to the saddle, and Joris, and he; I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three; ‘Speed!’ echoed the wall to us galloping through; ‘Speed!’ echoed the – er – [pause] Then the gates shut behind us, the lights sank to rest [pause] I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t remember my own verses; but one thing which I shall remember all my life is, the astonishing sensation produced upon me by your wonderful invention. Robert Browning!

[Gouraud:] Bravo bravoo bravo! Hip hip hooray...

In his introduction, which is omitted from most commercial versions of this recording, Gouraud makes a point of situating Browning within a transatlantic literary context, which Browning discreetly takes up with his choice of a poem about a distantly travelling message.
The driving meter of ‘How They Brought the Good News’ produces the rhythmical gallop that acts as an aid to memory. It is no accident variations on ‘gallop’ appear five times in the opening stanza (as published) alone:

I sprang to the stirrup, and Joris, and he;
I galloped, Dirck galloped, we galloped all three;
‘Good speed!’ cried the watch, as the gate-bolts undrew;
‘Speed!’ echoed the wall to us galloping through;
Behind shut the postern, the lights sank to rest,
And into the midnight we galloped abreast.

(Browning 1845: 395)

If Browning’s mid-stanza breakdown seems to parallel those of the poem’s two of three horses that falter on their way to Aix, that is because the work itself is an antiquated transportation poem, and of a fabricated event, at that. Published in the midst of the Railway Boom of the 1840s, Browning’s poem creates a horse-powered history that never happened in order to reflect on the bewildering rhythms of a steam-powered present. The ‘iron horse’ of the railway not only was remaking the English landscape in the period of the poem’s composition but also the Belgian one, where the newly created Kingdom had from the mid 1830s a ‘primary objective’ in its railway building ‘to establish international lines of communication across the borders’ (Laffrute 1983: 205–06). As the Handbook for Travellers on the Continent, first published in the 1830s, would go on to note some years later: ‘Belgium, from the level surface of the country, is peculiarly well suited for railroads, which can be constructed at much less cost here than in England, and have in consequence extended their ramifications through all parts of the kingdom’ (A Handbook for Travellers on the Continent 1851: 92–93). Written in August 1844, ‘How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix’ indirectly acknowledges this contemporaneous technological breakthrough in communications and international travel: the ‘good news’ of the 1843–44 completion of the costly, complicated railway line linking Ghent and Belgium with Aix-la-Chapelle and Prussia. The Handbook for Travellers provides an apt description of the accomplishment: ‘The country between Liège and Aix-la-Chapelle presented serious obstacles to the formation of a railway, which have been overcome only by the utmost skill and arduous exertions of the engineer. The cost exceeded 25,000,000 francs; there are no less than 19 tunnels in the Belgian part of the line alone, so that it has been compared to a needle run through a corkscrew’ (A Handbook for Travellers on the Continent 1851: 177).

In 1844, one no longer had to bring the good news from Ghent to Aix on horseback but could use the ‘iron horse’, or even the telegraph. This, counter-intuitively, is the poem’s underlying implication, coming as it does from the pen of a master of indirection whose curve of poetic line also might be ‘compared to a needle run through a corkscrew’. It ultimately makes sense for Browning to etch by phonograph needle, or at least start to, his covert railway verse on Edison’s communications breakthrough in 1888 with the knowledge that his message will be carried back to the States. Yet the poem never makes the ‘good news’—whatever that apparently vital message turns out to be—known to the reader. Or listener,
especially the listener to the Browning recording. Browning stops short in the
delivery of a poem that stops short of what might be called full media disclosure.
The ‘good news’ is delivered to Aix, but it is never delivered to us. There is pathos
in Browning’s forgetfulness, certainly; and yet we are left to wonder if this
forgetfulness also is telling after he chooses such an appropriate poem to break off
delivering. Browning’s botched recital on phonograph paradoxically also constitutes
a critical reading of this circuitous railway poem. (My argument gathers steam
from Yopie Prins’s 2008 exploration of the close connections among Browning’s
poetry and nineteenth-century American railways, art song, and early film.)

After Browning’s death in December 1889, the wax cylinder recording was used
in an unprecedented form of poet worship. In December 1890, for the first
anniversary of the poet’s funeral, F. J. Furnivall, president of the London Browning
Society, brought together Gouraud and others for what Browning’s sister called an
‘indecent séance’: ‘Poor Robert’s dead voice to be made interesting amusement’,
she wrote in a letter to Katherine Bradley, ‘God forgive them all. I find it difficult’
(Peterson 1969: 29–30). The event was illustrated in W. T. Stead’s Review of
Reviews, where it was titled ‘A Voice from the Dead’ (Figure 34.3). (It is no
coincidence that Stead was a noted spiritualist.) The thumbnail image in the upper
right corner is based on an actual photo of Browning, but by the way it is
positioned, he appears to be looking down on the proceedings somewhat chagrined.
It is not clear if that is because he is depressed by the number of apparently
respectable people who are listening to, as the caption puts it, ‘the actual voice of
a dead man’, or if he is just horrified by the artist’s shoddy work in this Montry
Pythonesque illustration. Juxtapose Browning’s expression with the confident,
youthful one of Edison, looking out from the opposite corner, as Gouraud stands
in the middle of them, the go-between overseeing the inventor’s machine. The
portraits frame the agent in a way similar to Gouraud’s introductory framing of
Browning’s original recording, which emphasized the capture of a transatlantic poet,
not merely an English one.

What is especially interesting about this image is the absence of a phonograph
horn, which might be expected on a home device, and instead the presence of six
headsets, or what were called at the time ‘hearing tubes’. Jonathan Sterne has
traced the way that modern headset culture evolved from the invention of the
binaural stethoscope by Arthur Leared in 1851 (Sterne 2003: 154–77). The binaural
stethoscope can be regarded as a quintessential Victorian invention: the first
documented appearance of Leared’s device is as an item on display at the Great
Exhibition, whose catalogue describes it as a ‘double stethoscope, made of gutta
percha’ (Great Exhibition 1851: 477). Several phonograph models in the 1880s
and 1890s were intended to be used with binaural headsets, such as dictation
phonographs and coin-in-the-slot machines in phonograph parlours.

The evolution of the headset also represents the development of what Sterne
calls ‘private acoustic space’ in the fin de siècle. The Browning recording was made
in a period when the skill doctors applied in listening to the body through the
stethoscope migrated into phonography and, in Sterne’s words, into ‘a specific kind
of bourgeois sensibility about hearing and acoustic space’ (Sterne 2003: 161, 159–60).
The phonograph headset in the Review of Reviews illustration can be thought of
as a disembodied stethoscope, in the sense that the participants are listening not to
short in the media disclosure. There is pathos wonder if this and to break off also constitutes gathering steam the Browning's film.) Reading was used, for the first don Browning sister called an amusement, ind it difficult d's Review of 4.3. (It is no in the upper the way it is hat chagrined. of apparently actual voice of in this Monty the confident, ouraud stands machine. The try framing of Atlantic poet, a phonograph presence of six an Sterne has mention of the. The binaural tion: the first at the Great made of gutta in the 1880s 1 as dictation, f what Sterne ling was made y through the a specific kind 161, 159-60). be thought of stening not to

a live body but to a speech machine playing the voice of an absent corpse. (The figure on the left, Dr Furnivall, in particular seems to strike the pose of a listening doctor.) The illustration captures the moment, and the crude rendering I think only draws attention to this, when the move was on to privatize and make clinical and respectable the middle-class activity of close listening to reproduced sound, even if, as in this early case, that meant the sound of a botched recital. The late Victorian phonograph turned Browning the unconventional poet into Browning the awkward sound object, a fitting finale for a century of tense sonic transition.

Figure 34.3 Replaying Robert Browning, from Review of Reviews 5 (1892): 468
CODA: ON THE AIR

There is irony, of course, in Browning’s progression, from the ventriloquist who had disappeared behind his career-defining dramatic monologues to the recorded persona left speechless for worshipful Victorians. The rendering of Browning mute as well as invisible by the phonograph was part of its larger effect of severing the traditional presumed connection between sound and source. In doing so, the machine raised troubling questions about the relationship among the listener, the speaker, and the spoken word. Ivan Kreilkamp has written persuasively of the ‘phonographic logic’ that underlies Joseph Conrad’s 1899 Heart of Darkness (Kreilkamp 2006: 179–205). Yet even by the time of H. G. Wells’s fin-de-siècle scientific romance The Invisible Man (1897), which was a major influence on Conrad’s tale, the novelty of disembodiment made possible by late Victorian sound technologies had become an established fact, prompting Wells’s speculation about the significance of invisible speakers in the late Victorian soundscape.

The Invisible Man is on one level a pastiche of the Victorian fascination with the experience of phonographic and telephonic speech, in that Wells’s protagonist Griffin never achieves total disembodiment. For nearly the entire novel, Griffin’s face remains bandaged, masked, or invisible, and Griffin registers in the text acoustically, as voice. Well before, and after, readers learn his name, the narrator repeatedly refers to Griffin as ‘the aerial voice’ or simply ‘the Voice’ (Wells 1897: 39, 43ff.). The initial impression Griffin makes on others is that of a quasi-spiritual authority, or as one of them puts it, ‘A voice out of heaven!’ (Wells 1897: 48). Griffin’s godlike aspiration to be an invisible voice runs up against an insurmountable problem, however: his body. Wells makes the point succinctly enough when he follows Griffin’s comment: ‘Help me, and I will do great things for you. An invisible man is a man of power’, with the narrator’s aside, ‘He stopped for a moment to sneeze violently’ (Wells 1897: 48). That ill-timed sneeze humorously indicates that the attainment of transcendent vocality that Griffin apparently desires, and that the phonograph was purported to enable, is impossible. His is what Michel Chion has called, with reference to film sound, ‘a half-embodied voice’ (Chion 1994: 128).

And yet Griffin’s status becomes more than a mere send-up of late Victorian phonographic fantasies. On the one hand, the genealogy of the invisible man can be traced all the way back at least to Sartor Resartus, where, as Kate Flint reminds us, Carlyle had cautioned that ‘the unseen may be more powerful than the seen’ (Flint 2000: 20). On the other hand, Wells is also looking ahead: the first radio station (in nascent form, as wireless telegraphy station) opened in 1897, the year The Invisible Man was published, and the book seems conscious of the risks of a technological future – in this case, the social functions of sound on the air. Wells represents Griffin’s body as an unstable racial presence and in doing so captures the special dynamic of early recorded and broadcast sound, which challenged what Lisa Gitelman has called ‘the visuality of music’, the sum of visual experiences that bolster and accompany musical practice and that extend to the societal norms of visually apprehending racial and other differences’ (Gitelman 1999: 125).

The phonograph, telephone, and radio permitted new kinds of invisibility that at once obscured but in different ways drew attention to what might be called the
face of race. Wandering naked yet invisible through London, Griffin hears, he says, 'a blare of music' that turns out to be the inevitable Salvation Army Band, 'chanting in the roadway and scuffing on the pavement': 'Thud, thud, thud came the drum with a vibrating resonance' (Wells 1897: 105). In one of Wells’s better little blasphemies, the hymn they sing is identified as 'When shall we see his face?' (Wells 1897: 105). This question pinpoints a key (if not the key) aural anxiety of electrified modernity. The Invisible Man, Wells would write much later, is 'a tale, that thanks largely to the excellent film recently produced by James Whale, is still read as much as it ever was. To many young people nowadays I am just the author of the Invisible Man' (Wells 1934: 475). That bit of self-deprecation indicated a larger truth: if many people in 1934 only associated Wells with The Invisible Man, perhaps that was because Wells had become one on the radio, welcoming his transformation into an invisible voice when he began broadcasting his periodic talks on the BBC in 1929, as the radio craze took hold in Britain. In this way as in so many others, Wells’s late Victorian fiction oversteps the ostensible boundary of its era. The initial Victorian forays into the technological manipulation of sound as well as the anxieties these practices raised would find their legacy in unlikely places, including one of the most powerful examinations of the social consequences of urban modernity in the twentieth century. With more than a nod toward Wells, Ralph Ellison famously frames his novel Invisible Man (1952) as a pirate radio station broadcast: 'Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?' (Ellison 1952: 581).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank Martin Hewitt, Virginia Zimmerman, Deirdre d’Albertis, Daniel Morat, Terry Ogell, and Nicholas Daly for providing me with the opportunity to present some of the material from this essay at Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds; Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA; the Bard Music Festival, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY; the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences; Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA; and University College Dublin. I also am grateful to the audiences at these venues for their comments and suggestions.

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— John M. Picker —


618