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Lyric Ear: Romantic Poetics of Listening

By

Claire Marie Stancek

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Committee in charge:

Professor Kevis Goodman, Chair

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## Abstract

## Lyric Ear: Romantic Poetics of Listening

by

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University of California, Berkeley

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My dissertation, *Lyric Ear: Romantic Poetics of Listening*, turns from a centuries-long critical focus on the “lyric voice” to consider instead what I am calling the lyric ear, or the speaking ear. I offer case studies in four nineteenth-century British and American poets, exploring how each develops poetics of listening that open up authorship, agency, and singularity—into unknown collaboration, receptive action, and multiplicity. By focusing on how lyric constructs the ear, rather than the voice, I argue that poetry expands participation to include bodies, objects, and surroundings that share physical space, rather than simply those who have the agency or the privilege to speak. Although the trope of the speaking ear works differently for each poet, certain characteristics remain constant: 1) the speaking ear involves a description of listening, which goes so far in its intensity or detail that it explicitly or implicitly figures the poem itself as an ear; 2) the construction of the poem-as-ear intensifies into a moment of apparent paradox, in which the actions of the mouth and the ear become interchangeable; 3) the descriptions of listening that extend into imaginations of the poem-as-ear propagate formal repetitions, which in all four chapters include refrain, repetition, and rhyme. The speaking ear makes an organ of receptivity also an instrument of speech, which demonstrates how the body and its parts work in unexpected, unpredictable ways. Unknowable collectivities of listeners construct alternative participations in speaking and in listening, vibrating across registers of music and noise, sharing verbs even as they share the space of a soundscape.

My first chapter, on Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*, posits gossip as a means of conceiving the speaking ear *par excellence*. According to gossip’s understudied generic conventions, the speaker is most importantly a listener. Gossip is collaborative, both in

its construction and in its reception. Passed from ear to ear, gossip shares authors, just as it spreads in unpredictable ways. Throughout Robinson's *Lyrical Tales*, the figure of gossip works to multiply and generalize the speaking voice and its affects, giving the impression that the story at hand is not authored by a single identity, but rather that it approximates and synthesizes the shared impressions of a community. My second chapter, on John Clare's bird poems, picks up on the collaborative possibilities of the speaking ear to challenge authorship and brings these possibilities into the non-human world. Through poems that variously invite listening attention, and perform poetic impressions of birdsong, Clare asks what the terms of engagement are when there is no common language. In my third chapter, on perversity, occultism, and slow violence in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, I trace how the repetitious, inanimate "bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells" in Poe's eponymous poem destabilize the environments they simultaneously enliven. I consider poetic effects such as rhyme and repetition as passive or barely-perceptible agents of quiet (but decidedly sonic) violence. My final chapter considers Emily Dickinson's poem, "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear," as a prompt to the question: what, then, is the unconscious ear? To say that the Spirit is the Conscious Ear does not isolate the ear's listening, but expands the ways the ear can work. Through the punning deictic here (hear), Dickinson turns the poem into a speaking ear, an organ of receptivity with diverse capacity for sounding and sensing, and strange powers of speech. The poem, like the ear, is a body for sound, a body of sound. I argue that Dickinson's vibrational poetics are necessarily permeable, conducting an interpenetration between senses and sounds. By parsing differences between listening and hearing, I argue that the unconscious (in)attention of the dreaming body invites new and slippery ways of understanding how the sonic skips and disjunctions of puns, recurring rhymes, syntactic discontinuities, and fragmentary sound-bites illuminate Dickinson's poetry and letters more broadly.

For my mom

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Introduction  
Lyric Ear

Who has not waked to list the busy sounds  
Of summer's morning, in the sultry smoke  
Of noisy London?

—Mary Robinson, "London's Summer Morning" (1-3)

**Prologue: "list the busy sounds"**

With this question, Mary Robinson's poem, "London's Summer Morning" begins. The question implies a community, even if the members of that community remain unspecified. "Who has not waked" in such a way? The question solicits membership, even while it insists that we are already here, listening together. "[N]oisy London" unites us in a shared acoustic space, the space of the cityscape sounding out. Waking into sound becomes both an interruption of an action, and the action itself; the listener wakes from sleep, presumably roused by the noise she hears, and in this way coming into consciousness becomes synonymous with listening. Sound reaches into unconsciousness and troubles it, shakes it into wakefulness. Sound calls the listener out of the world of sleep, but yet it is not necessarily part of the conscious world. Rather, these "busy sounds" hover between waking and sleeping; they populate the sleeper's ear as much as they fill the air outside. What is the busyness of sound? Its activity, as we shall see, is not straightforwardly active. Rather, Robinson introduces us, with this question, to the trope of the speaking ear, to which we will return soon. "[T]o list" in this context refers *both* to the action of listening, *and* to the words of the poem, which form a list. Listening is thus active and passive, verb and noun, ear and mouth. The poem's speaker might just as aptly be called the poem's listener.

Since this Robinson poem will be our point of departure, I will quote it in its entirety:

Who has not waked to list the busy sounds  
Of summer's morning, in the sultry smoke  
Of noisy London? On the pavement hot  
The sooty chimney-boy, with dingy face  
And tattered covering, shrilly bawls his trade,  
Rousing the sleepy housemaid. At the door  
The milk-pail rattles, and the tinkling bell  
Proclaims the dustman's office; while the street  
Is lost in clouds impervious. Now begins  
The din of hackney-coaches, waggons, carts;



While tinmen's shops, and noisy trunk-makers,  
 Knife-grinders, coopers, squeaking cork-cutters,  
 Fruit-barrows, and the hunger-giving cries  
 Of vegetable-vendors, fill the air.  
 Now every shop displays its varied trade,  
 And the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet  
 Of early walkers. At the private door  
 The ruddy housemaid twirls the busy mop,  
 Annoying the smart 'prentice, or neat girl,  
 Tripping with band-box lightly. Now the sun  
 Darts burning splendor on the glittering pane,  
 Save where the canvas awning throws a shade  
 On the gay merchandise. Now, spruce and trim,  
 In shops (where beauty smiles with industry)  
 Sits the smart damsel; while the passenger  
 Peeps through the window, watching every charm.  
 Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute  
 Of humming insects, while the limy snare  
 Waits to enthrall them. Now the lamp-lighter  
 Mounts the tall ladder, nimbly venturous,  
 To trim the half-filled lamps, while at his feet  
 The pot-boy yells discordant! All along  
 The sultry pavement, the old-clothes-man cries  
 In tone monotonous, while sidelong views  
 The area for his traffic: now the bag  
 Is slyly opened, and the half-worn suit  
 (Sometimes the pilfered treasure of the base  
 Domestic spoiler), for one half its worth,  
 Sinks in the green abyss. The porter now  
 Bears his huge load along the burning way;  
 And the poor poet wakes from busy dreams,  
 To paint the summer morning.

The entire poem is devoted to recording a soundscape, which is itself waking into existence: shops open, and working people begin to make noise outside. The scene also wakes the sleeping poet, in whose ear, as we discover in the final couplet, we have been positioned all along. These "busy sounds" (1) constitute a call into action, movement, clamor, and, importantly, work. Even the lounging poet— who, sleeping late, is evidently is not on the same schedule—is called out of sleep by the sounds, called into the expression of the poem. In this way, albeit a more circumscribed and dreamy one,

the poet, too, works. Robinson emphasizes the noise-like quality of the sounds, their capacity to disturb, to rouse up, even to interrupt. This interruption becomes an interruption into community.

The sounds constitute shared space, and even a certain degree of interchangeability. The “hackney-coaches, waggons, carts” (10) all share a single verb, “din,” which suggests that all of their varied and individual sounds cohere. A hackney coach is a four-wheeled carriage drawn by two horses and holding six passengers; a wagon, by contrast, is usually significantly heavier; and a cart has two wheels rather than four. Each of these vehicles make sounds that are different from each other, in pitch as well as in volume, but the noisy scene unites them. The fact that all of these different vehicles make one “din” (10) suggests that the loud scene makes their different sounds indistinguishable from one another, or that they all contribute to the creation of one din. I also want to emphasize the way in which sound is mutually constructed by and constructs a context: different sounds are somehow inexpressibly linked by this shared surrounds. Other moments of descriptions hint at this shared quality. For example, we hear how:

tinmen’s shops, and noisy trunk-makers,  
 Knife-grinders, coopers, squeaking cork-cutters,  
 Fruit-barrows, and the hunger-giving cries  
 Of vegetable-vendors, fill the air. (11-14)

This heterogeneous and clamoring list brings together as equal actors both animate and inanimate sounders: shops as well as the people who inhabit them, barrows as well as their vendors. As in the shared verb “din,” here actors and objects of action share one grammatical position. Although not technically parallel, these varied sounders have become parallel nevertheless, as Robinson forces them into the parallel structure of the list, and as their sounds together populate the air. This connectedness, which Robinson discovers in sound and which she effects through the grammar of the list, suggests that the togetherness of noise asks for different relationships between humans and nonhumans. If, in this poem, to be active is to make noise, then activity is not limited to the human. There is a peculiar intimacy between the object and agent of labor in this sequence. The sound of trunk-makers, knife-grinders, coopers, and squeaking cork-cutters is evidently the sound of trunks being made, knives being ground, vessels being crafted, corks being squeakily cut. In this way, the product passively shaped at the hand of the creator in fact determines the maker’s sonic expression. Who is speaking, the trunk-maker or the trunk? This simultaneity collapses the voices of thing and human, creator and created. (We can think too of the poem’s dubious usurpation of the poet’s ear, introduced as is between sleeping and waking, which puts agency into doubt, as though a dream could dream, making and being made at the same time.) And together,

these shops, makers, grinders, cutters, barrows, and vendors “fill the air” (14), at once etherealized into sound and made substantial by it. They leave whatever body or building they were before and become embodied sound, filling and full.

Robinson puts into apposition the capacity to sound and the capacity to speak. She interrogates the difference between these activities by obscuring their positions, suggesting their substitutability:

The milk-pail rattles, and the tinkling bell  
Proclaims the dustman’s office; while the street  
Is lost in clouds impervious. (7-9)

First the milk-pail “rattles” — a sound which, although it drowns out or usurps any sound that the milkmaid herself might be making, still remains correctly “object-like,” in the onomatopoeic world of inanimate clatter. The following verb is more dubious. The “tinkling bell / Proclaims” across enjambment, as though leaping across a line break from sound into voice, from tinkle into proclamation. The bell speaks in place of the dustman, announcing him but also substituting his voice. Robinson’s sounding world distributes agency. It may be important that this small sonic revolution takes place in the working world. Robinson hints at the possibility inherent in the noisy world of the laboring classes; that traditional hierarchies between active and passive, powerful and disempowered, become movable *here* is a particularly charged fantasy. The image of “the street . . . lost in clouds” (8-9) implies a public turmoil, perhaps political unrest. For Robinson, this suggestion of uprising is made possible through sound. These clouds suggest the dust of work, and manifest in an airy coherence of sound. What does it mean for streets to be lost in clouds of sound? The clear way forward becomes obscured. Linear motion forward (“the street,” [8]) becomes dispersed, diaphanous, airy (“lost in clouds impervious” [9]). We see a shift from directional thinking to non-teleological and communal simultaneity.

In addition to showing how working people and newly animated objects might, through sound, redistribute agency, Robinson also makes the sound of the poem itself undecidable. I want to focus for a moment on these “humming insects” (28) who appear, like the poet herself, bedazzled by the sensations that tempt them:

Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute  
Of humming insects, while the limy snare  
Waits to enthrall them. (27-29)

These enthralled creatures hover on the verge of being trapped by their delight, their own dream interrupted by their imaginations running ahead of themselves. This verb “hum” contributes to Robinson’s project of expanding agency. The insects, creatures so

small and indistinct that they are not even given the specificity of species, only a general swarm, are here heard. There is a way in which their “hum” runs parallel to the song of the poem. One would probably not say that a poet “hummed” (although we can think of Wordsworth’s “bumming and boeing” as a counterexample), but still this hum is close to the genre of song. A hum is a small song, on the verge of becoming a tune. We could consider it a song incipient. In this way, it is closely related to Robinson’s poem, whose sound is a collection of other sounds, fragmentary and collective.

Several meanings of “hum” clarify the verb’s importance in this poem. A “hum,” firstly, evokes the low sound made by an insect or machine. This meaning connects the voice of the insect to the voice of the machine, intensifying Robinson’s attention to the sounds of daily work. A “hum” is also an indistinct collectivity of sounds produced by the combination of voices or noises at a distance. This sense draws out the communal nature of the hum, as well as its capacity to blend voices together. As we have seen, this blending effect is important for Robinson throughout this poem. The third meaning that I want to call attention to has to do with machines, and describe the low-frequency variations in current or voltage that create a steady humming sound. This final meaning calls attention to the hum as a vibration. This poem, published in 1800 in a newspaper, is immersed in an urban industrial roar, the vibrations of factories and clattering vehicles. In “The Ontology of Vibrational Force,” Steve Goodman posits the vibration, rather than the sound, as the primary category of analysis. By considering the ways in which sound in fact involves physical movement, Goodman dislocates anthropocentric assumptions about what certain sounds might mean. Robinson’s hum already suggest this shift, by emphasizing a constant, barely perceptible vibration running underneath the dominant sounds in the poem.

Although the driving sense in this poem is that of sound, it is important to note that sound is not the only sense we perceive in these lines. Robinson also describes visual impressions, and invokes the sense of touch. We hear of “the pavement hot” (3) where stands the “sooty chimney-boy, with dingy face” (4). Later, again touch and temperature: “the fresh-sprinkled pavement cools the feet / Of early walkers” (16-17). Because of the dominance of sound in this poem, Robinson presses us to consider whether and in what ways these other senses relate to hearing. Like a double-beginning, the bawling chimney-boy of this passage wakes “the sleepy housemaid” (6), repeating the rousing that takes place in the first lines, and anticipating the final awakening at the end. Like an echo, this second waking frames and repeats the first. When the hot pavement is later cooled by sprinkled water, we again imagine the sensation of our feet on the ground. This might invoke the sensation of standing up on a surface that fills us with perceptions, that responds and asks us to respond to touch. It might also introduce a play on “feet” (16), poetic feet which step along the rhythmic poetic line. The physical world and the material substance of the poem converge. Again,

we see that “listing” is also “listening,” whether or not it has to do with sound. Sound, in these lines, has a body: it has feet.

A subtle refrain recurs throughout this poem, its insistence so quiet that it might at first go unnoticed. It is the repetition of the word “now,” which returns again and again to an ever-shifting present, collecting different perceptions and perceivers, and shifting even its position on the line. “Now begins / The din of hackney-coaches” (9-10), notes the listener, and “Now every shop displays its varied trade” (15). The morning progresses, and “Now the sun / Darts burning splendor” (20-21), and “Now, spruce and trim, / In shops. . . . Sits the smart damsel” (23-24). Soon we see that “Now pastry dainties catch the eye minute” (27), and “Now the lamp-lighter / Mounts the tall ladder” (29-30). “[N]ow the bag / Is slyly opened” (35-36), before finally, in the concluding lines of the poem, “The porter now / Bears his huge load” (40) and the poet wakes into the realization of the poem at the moment of its cessation: the poem is the half-waking succession of impressions in list form that concludes, elliptically. Again and again we feel the press of the present: now, and now. It is as though Robinson grafts together poetic time and clock time. With and through the rhythm of the poem, and the refrain that keeps poetic time, we encounter the now of the morning. In this way, the poem becomes a technology for sound recording, keeping locked certain moments in the line. But it also asks us to consider the embodiment of listening, which we have already encountered through the indeterminacy between the “list” and “listening.” Refrain lists the unfolding present, and although each referent changes, the deictic “now” calls for a similar attitude of awareness. Listing is always already listening.

And in this way, listening is a form of speech. The poet here is figured not as a speaker, but as someone who attends to the world around. The list merges with the poem, just as listening blurs with speaking. Robinson takes the familiar trope of the poet receiving inspiration from the Muse and emphasizes the act of listening over the act of expression. We are right to hear echoes of Milton in her blank verse rife with Miltonic inversions and multi-syllabic Latinate words. But Robinson’s version is pointedly feminized. She asks us to put poetic inspiration in a category shared by the everyday. The list in its shape actually looks like a lineated poem; the listener in her pose actually looks like a poet receiving inspiration. Robinson subtly calls for a reorientation by which these feminine, domestic articles and activities might successfully be taken (mistaken) for poetry. The insistent present of Robinson’s refrain “now” points reiteratively to that which is utterly ordinary, topical, fleeting.

### The Lyric Ear

In this dissertation, I will explore how four poets—Mary Robinson, John Clare, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson—present different manifestations of what I am

calling both the trope of the speaking ear and the lyric ear. Although this trope raises different questions and implications for each poet, for all four, three key characteristics of the speaking ear remain constant:

- 1) The speaking ear involves a description of listening, which goes so far in its intensity or detail that it explicitly or implicitly figures the poem itself as an ear. In Robinson, we encounter particularly repetitive insistence (more than in typical uses of the ballad form) that the substance of her poems is heard speech, such as “One day, report, for ever busy” (“Mistress Gurton’s Cat, a Domestic Tale”); “This farmer, as the tale is told” (“The Mistletoe, a Christmas Tale”); “The tattler, Fame, has said that she” (“Deborah’s Parrot, a Village Tale”); “’Tis said” (“Mistress Gurton’s Cat”); “Some say” (“Deborah’s Parrot”); “As gossips tell” (“The Fortune-Teller, a Gypsy Tale”). For Clare, the speaking ear manifests itself as two contrasting modes of receptive speech: the invitation, in which Clare elaborately constructs a pose of listening attention; and birdnoise, in which Clare performs listening by making the poem repeat incomprehensible animal sounds. Poe imagines the poem, “The Bells,” as an exercise in listening, which begins by asking us to “Hear,” and performs in the lines that follow an extended illustration of what it means to utter listening. In the central pun of Dickinson’s “The Spirit is the Conscious Ear,” the “here” that is the poem itself “hears” at the same time as it speaks.
- 2) The construction of the poem-as-ear intensifies into a moment of apparent paradox, in which the actions of the mouth and the ear become interchangeable. Again, this is realized in different ways by each poet. In Robinson, we will see how parody and gossip become two quintessential forms of expression that also listen. In Clare, the invitations and imitations of birdnoise perform listening and speaking at the same time. Poe’s concept of “perversity” brings together contrary urges, and imagines the ear doing the work of the mouth. For Dickinson, the poet paradoxically refuses the speaker’s role in favor of the listeners: “Nor would I be a Poet— / It’s finer—Own the Ear—” (17-18).
- 3) The descriptions of listening that extend into imaginations of the poem-as-ear propagate formal repetitions, which in all four chapters include refrain, repetition, and rhyme. In this way, the speaking ear works at the level of both trope and scheme: the metaphor of the poem as an ear is joined by the syntactic functions of poetic repetition.

Whereas the “lyric voice” has become a cliché both in criticism and in the creative writing workshop, the lyric ear is as yet untheorized. To consider it, however,

we might arrive at new ways of opening up authorship, agency, and singularity — into unknown collaboration, receptive action, and multiplicity. By considering how lyric constructs the ear, rather than the voice, we can expand participation to include bodies, objects, and surroundings that share physical space, rather than simply those who have the agency or the privilege to speak. Who is active and who is passive when it comes to listening? Unknowable collectivities of listeners construct alternative participations, vibrating across registers of music and noise, sharing verbs even as they share the space of a soundscape. Listening is an action that can involve many degrees of involvement: a listener might be intimately included in a conversation, taking turns to speak; or, she might be adjacent, eavesdropping, overhearing, or simply not expected to reply. The speaking ear voices, paradoxically, through listening itself. Listening can involve comprehension, but it does not have to (as we will see especially in the case of Clare’s bird poems); rather, listening is particularly open to the sonic obscurity of lyric poetry: rhyme, refrain, alliteration, assonance, dissonance.

The chapters that follow offer case studies in four nineteenth-century British and American poets for whom listening was a form of expression that voices. Before turning to these cases, however, I want to explore one cultural site that draws together questions of listening, collectivity, and the construction of gender: namely, etiquette books on both sides of the Atlantic written throughout the nineteenth century and before. These handbooks figure listening as a passive action which is consistently and elaborately gendered as feminine, in a way that makes passivity into an active and creative zone of potential. The next section brings together an archive of etiquette handbooks that contextualize how British and American cultures thought about listening. Feminized listening is repetitive and parodic in a way that is especially suited to poetic devices of repetition such as refrain and rhyme. But gender is just one ideological category that can be constructed alongside listening’s passive action. We will see that listening is also connected in subtle but consistent ways with ideas of the environment, in a way that anticipates and complicates current critiques of the subject.

### “the really eloquent silence”

To listen well is to make an unconscious advance in the power of conversing.

— *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* (Florence Hartley, 1860)

It is as great an accomplishment to listen with an air of interest and attention, as it is to speak well.

— *The Gentlemen’s Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* (Cecil B. Hartley, 1860)

Nineteenth-century etiquette handbooks define listening as a concerted action that involves care, skill, intentionality, and practice. Listening is described as an “accomplishment,” as an “advance in the power of conversing” (Florence Hartley, *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette* 184). These handbooks tend to have a formulaic table of contents, which begin with an introduction and are followed in many cases by a first chapter entitled “Conversation.” Subsequent chapters build on these foundational guidelines with sections on politeness, table etiquette, etiquette in the street. Conversation is the base upon which these other rules are built. Polite conversation, according to the writers of nineteenth-century manuals on decorum, must be characterized above all by restraint: we encounter cautions against talking too much and against showing off learning, as well as grim prohibitions against jokes and, above, all, puns. Advice to men emphasizes restraining one’s temper (“Listen courteously to those whose opinions do not agree with yours, and *keep your temper*. A man in a passion ceases to be a gentleman” [Cecil B. Hartley, *The Gentlemen’s Book of Etiquette* 12]). Advice to women urges deference, as one’s interlocutor is probably more educated: “It is better to say too little than too much in company: let your conversation be consistent with your sex and age” (*True Politeness* 20). To both sexes, these manuals advise the “eloquent silence” of listening. Arthur Martine writes:

The power of preserving silence is the very first requisite to all who wish to shine, or even please in discourse; and those who cannot preserve it, have really no business to speak. Of course, I do not mean the dull, ignorant, sulky, or supercilious silence, of which we see enough in all conscience; but the graceful, winning and eloquent silence. The silence that, without any deferential air, listens with polite attention, is more flattering than compliments, and more frequently broken for the purpose of encouraging others to speak, than to display the listener’s own powers. This is the really eloquent silence. It requires great genius—more perhaps than speaking—and few are gifted with the talent; but it is of such essential advantage, that I must recommend its study to all who are desirous to take a share in conversation, and beg they will learn to be silent, before they attempt to speak. (*True Politeness* 8-9)

To preserve a listening silence is a “power” as well as a “prerequisite,” language that suggests both listening’s active quality, as well as its foundational position in a course of study. The phrase “eloquent silence” recurs in this passage, a silence that does more than please, but also engages, interacts, expresses. “It is an error to suppose that conversation consists in talking,” writes an anonymous “Gentleman” from Philadelphia in 1836: “A more important thing is to listen discreetly” (*The Laws of Etiquette* 48). Similarly, “An American Lady” in a handbook for women published in 1847 in



Pennsylvania suggests that conversation “consists not so much in saying something different from the rest, but in extending the remarks of others” (*True Politeness* 19). She continues: “Talking is not conversation, it is the manner of saying things which gives them their value” (20). These kinds of remarks echo the sentiment of popular eighteenth-century writers such as William Cowper, who, in “Conversation,” writes: “Words learn’d by rote a parrot may rehearse, / But talking is not always to converse” (7-8). Along with advising a “soft tone of voice” and courtesy, the American Lady observes that “One of the greatest requisites, also, is the art of listening discreetly” (*True Politeness* 20), an art, she says, that is an effective way to flatter the speaker. One of the most often quoted passages in British and American handbooks of politeness comes from the French philosopher and satirist, Jean de La Bruyère:

The great charm of conversation consists less in the display of one’s own wit and intelligence, than in the power to draw forth the resources of others; he who leaves you after a long conversation, pleased with himself and the part he has taken in the discourse, will be your warmest admirer. Men do not care to admire you, they wish you to be pleased with them; they do not seek for instruction or even amusement from your discourse, but they do wish you to be made acquainted with their talents and powers of conversation; and the true man of genius will delicately make all who come in contact with him feel the exquisite satisfaction of knowing that they have appeared to advantage. (e.g. *The Gentleman’s Book of Etiquette* 19, or *Martine’s Hand-Book of Etiquette* 15)

Here we see long verbal phrases that detail what density might inhere within a silent appreciation, an attentive reciprocity, a chiasmic desire from subject to object to subject: “Men do not care to admire you, they wish you to be pleased with them.” Such constructions emphasize the activity within silence’s apparent passivity, and populate with verbs an action that might at first seem like nonaction. In this way, the nonactive action of reading becomes aligned with listening: even as the reader must absorb this passage with attention, must hold together in suspension multiple clauses in a list, must focus the attention and finally synthesize the meaning of the sentence, so too must the listener be engaged with the action of reception. By casting listening as “[t]he power to draw forth,” La Bruyère hints at its conjuring, invocatory potential. Eloquent listening brings speech forth into the world.

Many of these nineteenth-century pedagogical handbooks were influenced by certain eighteenth-century poems, such as William Cowper’s *The Task*, which was hugely popular at the time. *The Task*, though not explicitly in the genre of the handbook, illustrates ideal domestic scenes. In Book IV, Cowper describes the silent work of women sitting and sewing in wintertime. The women work as someone reads aloud

from a book, engaged in listening and silently expressing (sewing) at the same time, which Cowper calls their “task”:

But here the needle plies its busy task,  
 The pattern grows, the well-depicted flower,  
 Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn,  
 Unfolds its bosom; buds and leaves and sprigs  
 And curly tendrils, gracefully disposed,  
 Follow the nimble finger of the fair;  
 A wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that blow  
 With most success when all besides decay. (*The Task* IV: 150-57)

It is striking that the silent sewing shares the same name as the poem itself, a parallel that asks us to think about what unites them. Cowper’s description of the embroidery develops the parallel: “The pattern grows” simultaneously with the poem itself, and “the well-depicted flower” is depicted both on the fabric and on the page. We might think of this as a moment of poetic grafting. But in contrast to Shakespeare’s famous grafting metaphor in Sonnet 18, which imagines the body as eternal as the poem (“When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st: / So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee”), Cowper domesticates the metaphor, inverts it: the poem is as eternal as the embroidered line. It is the sewing which depicts the “wreath that cannot fade,” and by switching the vehicle and the tenor, Cowper’s version emphasizes the silent eloquence of the one who wields the needle.

Although American and British pedagogical texts throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries give guidance to both men and women that emphasizes listening’s restraint, the act of listening is still powerfully and consistently gendered feminine—even in the Cowper passage above, the sewing silent listener is female. Whereas handbooks for men emphasize listening as one component of a conversation that also involves a great deal of talk, as well as the education and knowledge that support such talk, for women, handbooks tend to counsel receptivity as a goal in itself. In *The Man of Manners: Or, Plebeian Polish’d. Being Plain and Familiar Rules for a Modest and Genteel Behaviour, on Most of the Ordinary Occasions of Life*, published in London in 1737, Erasmus Jones urges conversational moderation for women in particular:

Beware of too great Talkativeness, a Fault incident to the Fair Sex, and extremely offensive in Conversation. It savours of Boldness, and is a great Intrenchment upon the Liberty of Company. She who monopolizes the Discourse, silences the

rest, and assumes the Quality of Mistress; and so keeps School without a License.  
(48)

Whereas Martine can write that “the power of preserving silence is the very first requisite to all who wish to shine,” Jones in this passage casts silence as the unwelcome position forced on those who must listen to an overly loquacious woman: “She who monopolizes the Discourse, silences the rest.” Jones implies a difference between real and counterfeit agency. The speaking woman “*assumes the Quality of Mistress*” (my emphasis), language that, for the speaking woman, puts true authority at a double remove. Not only is this Mistress simply the *quality* of mistress without the substance, but even the quality is “assumed,” which applies a false appropriation or seizing. In the same way, the speaking woman “keeps School without a License.” This metaphor is again densely layered. The image of keeping school is one that bears a gendered sting. As a female authority figure whose rules are flimsy, prim, and pedantic, the schoolmarm is an easily recognizable misogynistic trope. Further, she who speaks too much has no authority to do so; she has no license. But this also implies that the content of her talk, for not having been accredited, is false or empty. Who would be the agent of accreditation? This passage suggests that it might be something like patriarchy itself. The female voice, in this way, is structurally unlicensed, and therefore always already in a position of aberrance. In the same treatise, Jones states explicitly that women are better suited to listening than speaking:

Long Conversations flag, they languish at an Hour’s End, and fall into meer Chat and Impertinences. For Women have seldom Materials to furnish a long Discourse, unless they comment upon their Neighbours Failures, and turn their Misfortunes into the Subject of Diversion. (161)

Women seem constitutionally ill-suited to speaking. In this way, the role of listening is dependent on their silence. William A. Alcott (neighbor and close friend of Amos Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott’s father) emphasizes the importance of restraint, addressing wives directly, with the instruction, “set a guard over your tongue [...] if not over your thoughts” (*The Young Wife* 211).

Through silent absorption, women can shine in conversation. In *Social Etiquette OR Manners and Customs of Polite Society*, published in Philadelphia in 1896, Maud C. Cooke tells an anecdote about a woman whose conversational brilliance dazzles her interlocutors—though she says nothing at all:

Any lady, by profound attention to, and a pleased interest in the subject under consideration, may promote the conversation most skillfully and delightfully. Knowledge of the subject is not always necessary. An English savant, deeply

interested in Egyptology, once escorted a young lady out to dinner. His conversation, as a matter of course, turned entirely upon excavations, hieroglyphics, and kindred topics. Upon all these the young lady was profoundly ignorant, but, if unversed in Egyptian lore, she was most thoroughly versed in conversational arts, and, by her speaking glances of intelligence and her pleased smile, so fascinated the man of science that he enthusiastically declared afterward that "Miss L was one of the best conversationalists and the most intelligent young lady he had ever met, and that her knowledge of Egyptology was something wonderful." This, to one who had sat opposite them at table, and could have vouched that the lady in question had not spoken a single word through the entire dinner, was slightly amusing. So strong, however, was the impression left upon the mind of the savant by her interested attention, that it would have been difficult to convince him of the fact. (38)

"Any lady" in this way can instantly become an expert on any subject, no matter how abstruse, by smiling and nodding. Her role is not to speak, but to "promote the conversation most skillfully and delightfully." But again, when women do not speak, they are not unspeaking. Cooke's language is descriptive: this woman, "thoroughly versed in conversational arts" successfully communicates by "speaking glances of intelligence" and a "pleased smile." Through practice, skill, and intelligence, she holds an entire conversation by means of her ears.

The emphasis on intelligence is important; these handbooks take pains to establish another kind of knowledge and education for which women in particular must strive. For women, the goal is not to be interesting, but to create delight by making the tedious (and, as it happens, orientalist) scholar of Egyptology believe himself interesting. If the woman in this scene did interject with true knowledge, and correct the monologuer's interpretation of a hieroglyph, she would fail to effect the same delight. In a handbook published in 1840, William A. Alcott writes, in a chapter entitled "Reasoning and Originality," of the proper application of such terms to women's capacities:

I know not why a young woman should not reason correctly as well as a young man. And yet I must confess, that some how or other, a masculine idea seems to be often attached to the thought of strong reasoning powers in the female sex. To say of such or such a young woman, She is a bold and powerful reasoner — would it not be a little uncommon? Would it be received as a compliment? Would it not be regarded as a little out of the way — and, to coin a term, as rather unfeminine? (*The Young Woman's Guide to Excellence* 144)

By these insinuating questions, whose tone suggests that the answers are self-evident, Alcott hints that it would be transgressive for a woman to show a capacity to reason that matched a man's. Her sphere of knowledge is expressly domestic. Alcott goes on to praise another kind of "reasoning" possessed by "the mothers of New England, in the days of her primitive beauty and glory." This reasoning consists of "that good old fashioned education to house-work," which was actually "good for something." In this way, pedagogical handbooks work together in constructing gendered conversational spheres. If women should listen, as they are instructed in these manuals, in a way that demonstrates dazzling knowledge but possesses none, if they should seem vibrantly engaged without speaking a word, and if they should receive education without the capacity ever to gain education, feminized listening becomes an infinitely recessive zone of possibility. It is a realm of surface, of echoing reflection, and endless repetition. If feminized listening were a sound, it would be a refrain, an echo, a rhyme. The listening constructed in these handbooks seems particularly suited not only to sonic play, but also to parody, which anticipates my reading of Robinson in Chapter One.

We have seen how the feminine power to please is ornamental, pleasing, delightful. These handbooks also take pains to insist on its moral virtue. Cooke explains:

The very essence of the art of conversation is to draw others out and cause them to shine; to be more anxious, apparently, to discover other people's opinions than to advance your own. Who does not remember gratefully and admiringly the sympathetic people who seem to draw out the very best there is in us—in whose company we appear almost brilliant, and actually surprise ourselves by the fluency and point of our remarks? Such people are a boon to society. No one sits dull and silent in their presence, or says unpleasant, sarcastic things before them, and, while never seeming to advance any views of their own, and certainly never forcing them upon our attention, we involuntarily learn of them and love them, scarcely knowing why. (42)

While called an "art," and therefore implying the need for skill and practice, feminine conversation is a social and moral good. These exemplary women "draw out the very best there in us" by making us feel "almost brilliant." Women skilled at pleasing in this way are, moreover, a "boon to society," and, though saying nothing about themselves, the "we" of this paragraph somehow "learn[s] of them" by osmosis "and love[s] them, scarcely knowing why." The listening woman in this way sets up a feedback loop for the man—for of course the "we" is imagined as masculine here—by which he is enabled to speak constantly, to witness himself amplified to greater and greater brilliance, and through this, to fall in love with the skilled and benevolent artist of amplification, who

becomes a receding instrument of his own reproduction, like a mirror, or an echo. We will see how readily this moral reiteration can slip into the warped mirror of parody.

But in addition to explicitly counselling women to listen and be expressively silent, a wealth of passages construct the speaking ear more elaborately. These scenes imagine how a woman might teach by passive example, might guide her family without seeming to. These kinds of constructions suggest that the woman's listening action as one of repetition, reframing, remembering. She becomes an embodiment of a refrain, a sonic effect that reflects with strange and subterranean agency, throwing authorship into question. In *The Mother at Home; Or, the Principles of Maternal Duty Familiarly Illustrated* (1833), John S. C. Abbott, pastor and prolific writer of pedagogical texts, tells the story of a patient wife and mother waiting late at night for her drunken husband to come home from carousing. Her sons have gone to bed. The husband arrives home intoxicated, with the wild idea of waking his sons to go for a load of wood, even though there was enough wood in the house. The wife sees that she cannot oppose him:

[She] called her sons, and told them that their father insisted upon their going with the team to the wood lot. She spoke to them kindly; told them she was sorry that they must go; but, said she, "Remember that he is your father." Her sons were full grown young men. But at their mother's voice they immediately rose, and, without a murmur, brought out the oxen, and went to the woods. They had perfect confidence in her judgment and her management. (78)

Here we see several layers of submissive listening. The wife listens to her husband and mediates his voice; she becomes a speaking ear in this scene, communicating only her obedience to his irrational word. The sons, in turn, submit to the father's word via the mother's. Her instruction, "Remember that he is your father," returns elliptically back upon the self-evident remembrance of filial duty. Remember, recall: the mother repeats rather than originates. We can think here of Robinson's listing listening. When Abbott steps back to moralize, he deftly weaves together passivity and activity:

Many a mother has thus been the guardian and the savior of her family. She has brought up her sons to industry, and her daughters to virtue. And in her old age she has reaped a rich reward for all her toil, in the affections and attentions of her grateful children. She has struggled, in tears and discouragement, for many weary years, till at last God has dispelled all the gloom, and filled her heart with joy in witnessing the blessed results of her fidelity. Be not, therefore, desponding. That which has once been done, may be done again. (79)

By imagining the abused woman as "the guardian and savior of her family," Abbott turns her passive submission into noble action. This argument for patience has a

distinctly Christian ring to it, and sure enough, Abbott soon predicts that God will reward suffering one day. The final line of this wonderful and bizarre passage is a complete non-sequitur: “That which has once been done, may be done again.” What this riddle means is unclear. Phrased in pseudo-biblical cadences, its rhythm evokes the strong parallelism of certain Christlike platitudes (“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”), but rather than pointing into a vague future, it falls back on precedent: what has been done can be done. This is an image of duplication, repetition, recurrence. We might also read it as a figure for listening: attention to the past allows for the repetition. The ear is bound to what it receives. Abbott imagines the good woman as one who acts by reenacting what has already been acted. This elliptical doubling should remind us of Robinson’s listening attention in “London Summer’s Morning.” The speaker repeats what she hears, making what has been done into a recurrence.

**“by indirect if not by silent efforts”**

In the previous section, I described how pedagogical handbooks construct listening alongside and through the simultaneous construction of normative femininity. But this is by no means the only way to understand the development of listening in the period, nor the only focus of this dissertation. We will also see how these more elaborate constructions of the speaking ear become connected to ideas about the environment. Although issues of gender will be central to the first and final chapters (on Robinson and Dickinson, respectively), the second chapter, on Clare, and the third chapter, on Poe, develop a poetics of listening more concerned with the incomprehensible otherness of animals (in Clare), and the ways in which acoustics can define a sense of local surroundings (in Poe). These middle two chapters might be said to concern what we now in contemporary language call the environment. As Vladimir Jankovic points out in *Confronting the Climate*, the environment as we now understand it, as a generalized entity referring to that which is a surrounding outside, would have been anachronistic in the eighteenth century (9). Jankovic argues that a more accurate historical understanding of physical surroundings distinguishes between “in” and “out,” which “was normative, rather than spatial” (8). He describes a set of normative frameworks that expand outwards, from a sense of being inside one’s house, to being inside one’s neighborhood, or one’s village, or one’s country. The insides represent stable and controlled space, while the outsides represent regions of hazard (Jankovic 9). According to this dialectic, the idea of the feminine that we have been encountering in pedagogical handbooks hovers on a boundary that is never fully “in,” nor entirely “out.” In one way, the domesticized feminine defines the familiar space of the home. But in another sense, as we have seen, the feminine is de-authorized—in Erasmus Jones’

phrase, again, “without a License” — and in this way, hazardous to and outside of authority.

There are fascinating moments when these pedagogical handbooks conflate the feminine with the vegetable world in a way that assign both a role of passive influence. In *The young wife; or, Duties of woman in the marriage relation* (1838), William A. Alcott expands on the ways in which the wife’s influence on her husband occurs:

It is by indirect means—silent, gentle, and often unperceived, but always operative. The growth of the vegetable world is not so much effected by the bright meridian glare of heaven’s resplendent luminary, and by the violent rain and the tempest, as by the milder light of morning and evening, the gentler breezes, the soft descending showers, and the still more softly distilling dew. In like manner is it the province of woman to accomplish most for human advancement, and above all in her own family, by indirect if not by silent efforts. She is to teach, at least in no small degree, as though she taught not. She is to perform the duties of her office, not like the king of day, but rather like the paler empress of night, in so unperceived a manner as to leave it doubtful whether she has any influence or not, except by the general law of attraction. (24)

Via a detailed metaphor by which Alcott divides the workings of the natural world into a binary which he then maps onto the gender binary, the wife’s agency is “indirect.” She embodies her pedagogy, though herself remains “silent.” Alcott pictures the feminine influence as a naturalized (and normative) surrounds that encompasses and mildly hosts. There is a strange way in which this image brings the outside inside, or the inside outside, according to the opposition that Jankovic establishes. What slight words the wife speaks recede into a backdrop of negligible sound. She works “by indirect if not by silent efforts,” a phrase that yokes the indirect—which might include offhand remarks, hints, suggestions, or the more abstract ambient sound, background noise, birdsong, bells, chatter, incoherency—with attentive silence. Alcott’s description of her speech hovers on the threshold between total silence and unimportant, almost silent, practically unfelt sound. We see this indirection develop from Alcott’s phrase in the first line of the above quote, “by indirect means—silent, gentle, and often unperceived” to “by indirect if not by silent efforts.” Her words in this way become aligned with and absorbed into the receptive landscape that influences without will or force: the “milder light of morning and evening,” the softest wind, the showers, but better yet, the “more softly distilling dew.” The feminized surroundings perform actions that register under the threshold of actions; they proceed mildly, so slowly as to be nearly without action, or on another scale of acting. The wife’s ambient presence is in this way generalized, dispersed, and made literally marginal, insofar as it is collapsed into the surroundings.



It is tempting to draw a connection between the construction of gender and the development of ideas of the environment. Normative imaginations of femininity were invested in making gender “natural” by means of constructions that sometimes aligned with the simultaneous naturalization of what we now think of as “the environment.” What we can say is that there seem to be crucial moments when the feminine is paired with the natural world, if only in the space of metaphor. How deeply metaphors came to define assumptions about the “natural” — whether that be applied to gender roles or what we would now term an environmental consciousness — is beyond the scope of this project. But I want to keep them suggestively paired, if only for the way they illuminate certain constellations between the poets in this study.

In the chapters that follow, I explore how the poetics of the ear create new possibilities for listening in four nineteenth century poets. My first chapter, on Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*, posits gossip as a means of conceiving the speaking ear *par excellence*. According to gossip’s understudied generic conventions, the speaker is most importantly a listener. Gossip is collaborative, both in its construction and in its reception. Passed from ear to ear, gossip shares authors, just as it spreads in unpredictable ways. Throughout Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales*, the figure of gossip works to multiply and generalize the speaking voice, along with the affect that the speaking voice describes, giving the impression that the story at hand is not authored by a single identity, but rather that it approximates and synthesizes the shared impressions of a community. My second chapter, on John Clare’s bird poems, picks up on the collaborative possibilities of the speaking ear to challenge authorship and brings these possibilities into the non-human world. Through poems that variously invite listening attention, and perform poetic impressions of birdsong, Clare asks what the terms of engagement are when there are no common terms. In my third chapter, on perversity, occultism, and slow violence in the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe, I trace how the repetitious, inanimate “bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells” in Poe’s eponymous poem destabilize the environments they simultaneously enliven. I consider poetic effects such as rhyme and repetition as passive or barely-perceptible agents of quiet (but decidedly sonic) violence. My final chapter returns to the question of gender to consider Emily Dickinson’s poem, “The Spirit is the Conscious Ear,” as a prompt to the question: what, then, is the unconscious ear? To say that the Spirit is the Conscious Ear does not isolate the ear’s listening, but expands the ways the ear can work. Through the punning deictic here (hear), Dickinson turns the poem into a speaking ear, an organ of receptivity with diverse capacity for sounding and sensing, and strange powers of speech. The poem, like the ear, is a body for sound, a body of sound. I argue that Dickinson’s vibrational poetics are necessarily permeable, conducting an interpenetration between senses and sounds. By parsing differences between listening and hearing, I argue that the unconscious (in)attention of the dreaming body invites

new and slippery ways of understanding how the sonic skips and disjunctions of puns, same rhymes, syntactic discontinuities, and fragmentary sound-bites, illuminate Dickinson's poetry and letters more broadly.

Chapter One  
**The Poetics of Gossip: Romantic Parody and the Speaking Ear  
 in Mary Robinson's *Lyrical Tales***

But how are we to guard against the herd of promiscuous Readers? Can we bid  
 our *books* be silent in the presence of the unworthy?

—attributed to Rudolph von Langen<sup>1</sup>

“One day, report, for ever busy”; “This farmer, as the tale is told”; “The tattler, Fame, has said that she”; “‘Tis said”; “Some say”; “As gossips tell.” Such allusions to hearsay, chatter, and rumor abound throughout Mary Robinson’s 1800 volume, *Lyrical Tales*.<sup>2</sup> Frequently parenthetical, and unemphatic despite their repetitive accumulation, these one-line or half-line allusions to oral culture serve a variety of functions. For one, they give the impression that the story at hand is not authored by a single identity, but rather that it approximates and synthesizes the shared impressions of a community. This vocal multiplicity creates imprecision around both the speaker and the listener. Moreover, if the tellers of the tale are many and uncertain, equally uncertain is the intended audience, which may not—after all the bustling of report and twists and turns in telling—be us. Such references to gossip thus put authority into question, both at the level of author and auditor.

In the first part of this chapter, I will argue that Robinson’s imagery and iterations of gossip, with its extravagance and indecorousness, parody the representation of conversation in Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*. If *Lyrical Ballads* is, as Wordsworth declares in the Advertisement to the first edition, comprised of “experiments . . . to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure,” then gossip in *Lyrical Tales* critiques this premise of inclusiveness by enacting a marginal form of engagement that remains stubbornly outside the boundaries even of Wordsworth’s “adapted” conversations (47). In the second section, I show how Robinson’s gossip moves beyond a parody of *Lyrical Ballads* in particular and critiques the ideals of conversation in general. Gossip challenges traditional notions of community by staging conversations that are characterized not by individuality, but

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<sup>1</sup> Langen’s warning is quoted in Coleridge’s *The Friend*, and in turn quoted in David Simpson’s *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (169).

<sup>2</sup> “One day, report, for ever busy” (“Mistress Gurton’s Cat, a Domestic Tale,” 194, ll. 41-42); “This farmer, as the tale is told” (“The Mistletoe, a Christmas Tale,” 187, l. 11); “The tattler, Fame, has said that she” (“Deborah’s Parrot, a Village Tale,” 230, l. 15); “‘Tis said” (“Mistress Gurton’s Cat,” 193, l. 14); “Some say” (“Deborah’s Parrot, a Village Tale,” 234, l. 149); “As gossips tell” (“The Fortune-Teller, a Gypsy Tale,” 246, l. 1). All citations from *Lyrical Tales* refer to Judith Pascoe’s edition of Mary Robinson’s *Selected Poems*; hereafter, poems are cited by line number.

rather by a proliferative interchangeability. In this way, gossip puts certain humanist constructions of personal identity at risk. This discussion of repetition and interchangeability leads into this chapter's third and final section, which argues that gossip for Robinson ultimately becomes a figure for Romantic-era print culture and its ever-expanding crowd of readers. By figuring modern mass technology, gossip counters the moves that Wordsworth makes to align his verse with traditional voices of the past, such as when in his Advertisement he argues that "the more conversant the reader is with our elder writers," the more likely he is to approve of the style of *Lyrical Ballads* (47). In this way, gossip parodies both the traditional substance and the traditional channels of conversation. I argue that gossip skirts and stretches the limits of conversation by attempting to think outside of the speaker's purview. How can we represent conversation's exclusions? Robinson's answer is a chorus of ghostly ears—shadowy listeners who hear at the muttering margins, whether or not they are addressed.

### 1. (Alone, alone, all) All Alone: Allusion and the Writing Reader

From the moment of its publication, Robinson's volume had been involved in tensions over authorship and readership. Robinson published *Lyrical Tales* one month before *Lyrical Ballads* appeared in its second edition. Not only did her title make clear the reference to Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, but her typeface matched its typeface exactly, and she shared the seal of the same publisher, Longman. When Wordsworth saw the book, he considered changing his title to *Poems by W. Wordsworth*.<sup>3</sup> Critics have well documented both the reasons for Wordsworth's scruples as well as the thinking behind Longman's scheme.<sup>4</sup> As Judith Pascoe discusses, Robinson's sensationalized affair with the Prince of Wales in the 1780s, her highly successful acting career, and her open interest in popularity and commercial success would have been factors simultaneously at work in Wordsworth's attempt to distance his poetry from *Lyrical Tales* (20, 38). But as Ashley Cross notes, Longman had his reasons for allowing the similarities to persist—and for possibly pairing the books intentionally (579). Whereas Longman printed 500 copies of *Lyrical Ballads*, he printed 1250 of *Lyrical Tales*, which suggests that Robinson's volume was more likely to be profitable, and that he

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<sup>3</sup> In an oft-cited journal entry, Dorothy Wordsworth writes, "Mrs. Robinson has claimed the title and is about publishing a volume of *Lyrical Tales*. This is a great objection to the former title, particularly as they are both printed at the same press and Longman is the publisher of both the works" (164). Wordsworth did ultimately add *Poems by W. Wordsworth* as a subtitle, though as Susan Eilenberg has argued in *Strange Power of Speech*, this change was also (and perhaps in a greater sense) bound up with his desire to claim authorial possession over Coleridge.

<sup>4</sup> See Judith Pascoe's introduction to *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, and Ashley Cross, "From *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*: Mary Robinson's Reputation and the Problem of Literary Debt."

may have expected Wordsworth and Coleridge's sales to benefit from their association with the more popular author (Cross 583).

Through paratextual elements such as typeface, publisher, and title, Robinson establishes her *Lyrical Tales* as an uncanny double of *Lyrical Ballads*. But if her volume challenges conceptions of authorial power, it speaks with—as much as against—Wordsworth and Coleridge's project. For Wordsworth himself was invested in demystifying the poetic voice, as he makes clear in his advertisement to the first edition, where he characterizes his poems as “experiments . . . written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure” (47). Robinson's references to gossip and chitchat seem to fit this model, both in their valuation of conversation and of humble language. In their stubborn dullness, Robinson's descriptions of what he said or she said posit the importance of the unimportant and thus stay true to the spirit of the earlier volume.

But even while they take up Wordsworth and Coleridge's project, Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* rewrite *Lyrical Ballads* with a certain acerbic difference. If her titles carefully mirror the subject matter and tone of Wordsworth and Coleridge's, the contents of the poems themselves frequently involve sarcasm, bawdy humor, and violent death, in a way that is absent from the other volume.<sup>5</sup> Robinson's alteration to the title of the collection—changing *Lyrical Ballads* to *Lyrical Tales*—could signal both a devious deviation and a companionship of spirit. The *OED* defines a “ballad” as “A popular, usually narrative, song,” and “A narrative poem in short stanzas, esp. one that tells a popular story.” Both of these definitions suggest synonymy with “tale” in one sense: “A story or narrative, true or fictitious, drawn up so as to interest or amuse, or to preserve the history of a fact or incident.” However, there are also important differences between the ballad and the tale. The fact that the ballad is traditionally sung aligns it more neatly with its adjective “lyrical,” which evokes both the characteristics of lyric poetry as well as the lyrics to song. Indeed, the long history of balladry as an oral, peasant form of art strengthens Wordsworth's claim to the “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society,” as well as the work of “our elder writers,” with whose established tradition he aligns himself later in the Advertisement (47). If the ballad

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<sup>5</sup> Robinson's similar titles, “All Alone,” “The Fugitive,” “The Negro Girl,” “The Deserted Cottage,” and “The Alien Boy,” could all easily have been taken from *Lyrical Ballads*—compare, for example, “The Female Vagrant,” “The Idiot Boy,” “The Convict,” “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman”—and they take up Wordsworth's interest in the marginalized, fugitive, and vagrant members of (or outcasts from) society. In contrast, the knowing attitude towards marital infidelity found in “The Mistletoe,” the violent yet disturbingly light-hearted cat hanging in “Mistress Gurton's Cat,” the wickedly humorous account of spousal abuse in “Deborah's Parrot,” and the multitude of miserable deaths found in “The Poor, Singing Dame,” “The Lascar,” “Old Barnard,” “The Negro Girl,” and “Golfre,” among others, are without true precedent in *Lyrical Ballads*.

evokes older poetry passed down through a tradition of oral culture, the tale in contrast might suggest the popular prose writing that was reaching a level of sensational popularity in the nineteenth century, and disseminated not by mouth but by print. Robinson's lyrical tales translate sentimental and gothic fictions into verse form, hybridizing the poetic and prosaic, oral tradition and print innovation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the prominence of print is central to Robinson's project, and allegories of reading characterize many of her most important engagements with *Lyrical Ballads*, as I will explore.

The term "tale" also differentiates Robinson's volume from Wordsworth and Coleridge's in its characterization of conversation. The *OED* further defines "tale" as: "The action of telling, relating, or saying; discourse, conversation, talk"; "The subject of common talk; the 'talk' (of the town, etc.)"; "Things told so as to violate confidence or secrecy; reports of private matters not proper to be divulged; idle or mischievous gossip; a falsehood." The status of "tale" as an uninvited and potentially malignant conversation is an important one for Robinson. For although she initiates a conversation with *Lyrical Ballads*, the question of whether *Lyrical Ballads* speaks back remains dubious. *Lyrical Ballads* does not invite her engagement, nor does it respond to Robinson's interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Thus Robinson occupies the uncertain position of the reader in the mass market, one lop-sided half of a dysfunctional conversation: listener, reader, respondent, with neither the promise of reciprocity nor the assurance that she was directly addressed in the first place. In this way, mass printing creates an audience of eavesdroppers on Wordsworth and Coleridge's "language of conversation," and in *Lyrical Tales* Robinson meditates on the marginality of the reader through her multiple and multiplying, misdirected speech that foregrounds receptivity and report: "'Tis said"; "Some say"; "As gossips tell."

What does it mean to speak as one who is not addressed, but yet still hears? In part because of the modern technology of mass printing, Robinson occupies the position of addressee in an imaginative conversation in which the speaker does not imagine or intend her as the recipient of address. Her responsive speech, then, compromises both her own position and the position of the original speaker. It threatens the conversation even while it engages in the conversation. Through its combination of imitation and critique, engagement and mockery, Robinson's *Lyrical Tales* can be said to be a parody of *Lyrical Ballads*, in the richest sense of the term. Both the meaning and the uses of parody have been disputed since antiquity, and the word has held different purposes

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<sup>6</sup> See Robinson's sentimental narratives, "The Lascar" and "The Negro Girl," and her gothic tales, "Golfre, a Gothic Swiss Tale" and "Old Barnard, a Monkish Tale."

<sup>7</sup> Coleridge's engagement with Robinson in the pages of the *Morning Post* is another story. David Erdman has characterized their interaction as a "newspaper flirtation" (Stelzig 119). See also Eugene Stelzig, "'Spirit Divine! With Thee I'll Wander': Mary Robinson and Coleridge in Poetic Dialogue," and Susan Luther, "A Stranger Minstrel: Coleridge's Mrs. Robinson."

during different periods. Whereas Restoration-era parodies tended to be harshly critical, modern and postmodern parodies are frequently admiring and intimate (Hutcheon and Woodland 1002).<sup>8</sup> Etymologically, parody derives from the ancient Greek *παρωδία* “parodia,” meaning “a narrative poem of moderate length, in epic meter, using epic vocabulary, and treating a light, satirical, or mock-heroic subject,” as well as *παρωδός* “parodos,” meaning “imitating singer,” or “singing in imitation.” The noun *παρωδή* “parode” combines elements from both earlier terms to suggest an “ode” “sung in imitation of another.” Margaret A. Rose emphasizes the ambiguity of the word “para,” which carries senses both of “by the side of,” “beside,” as well as “to one side, aside, amiss, faulty, irregular, disordered, improper, wrong,” and related suggestions of perversion and simulation (*Parody* 49, 52). Thus, as Rose describes, parody’s ambivalence towards its target is both definitional and structural, inhering both in the meaning of the prefix “para,” and in its tendency to envelop the targeted work within its own structure.<sup>9</sup>

Robinson’s gossip is a form of parody that asks what it means to speak from the position of the ear, from a perspective that questions the primacy of the speaker and in this way attempts to render the presence of others. In other words, Robinson establishes gossip as a form of engagement caught at the periphery and fully imbricated in both meanings of the “para” of “parody.” Minimized, feminized, and shunned, gossip stands “by the side of” traditional gentlemanly forms of conversation. Robinson’s gossip has an (appropriately) ambivalent position within *Lyrical Tales*. For while the speaker maintains a critical and frequently moralistic distance from it, gossip yet recurs as a motif of irreverence against traditional, somber, and wholesome conversation.

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<sup>8</sup> My discussion of parody is predominantly shaped by Margaret A. Rose’s *Parody: ancient, modern, and post-modern*, and Rose’s *Parody//Meta-Fiction: An Analysis of Parody as a Critical Mirror to the Writing and Reception of Fiction*. I also draw from Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* and Joseph A. Dane, *Parody: Critical Concepts Versus Literary Practices*.

<sup>9</sup> Parody and the related but not identical term, irony, have long been placed at the center of Romanticism. German Romantics such as Schlegel and Schiller have defined Romanticism as inherently ironic. In his *Kritische Fragmente* (1797), Schlegel defines irony as “the feeling of the irresolvable conflict between the unconditioned and conditioned” (108, II, 160), as well as “the impossibility and necessity of a complete communication” (cited in Simpson xii). In *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry*, David Simpson explicates this definition by saying that Romantic irony does not follow the traditional sense of using language that signifies the opposite of what it seems to mean, but rather is language that makes us “question the meaning of what he [the writer] says both as we receive it into our own codes and canons of significance and as it relates to the context of the rest of his utterances, their moods and voices” (xii). In this way Romantic irony becomes what Simpson calls a “problem of intentionality,” in that it rejects closure and determinacy, both on the part of the author and of the reader (183). Parody is not identical to irony, but it has the ironic component of putting the parodied text into question at the same time as the purity of its own critique becomes disputable; parody mocks the original text even while it re-establishes the importance of what came before. Thus parody, like irony, centers around a problem of intentionality, undermining the authority of the parodied text, as well as of the parody itself.

Robinson's gossip, in the simplest terms, is speech that lends itself to multiplication and repetition in order to emphasize its condition as heard speech, whether by foregrounding its repeated status, or by enacting repetitions in the moment of its utterance.<sup>10</sup> This repetition combines constructive social communication and sinister mischief into one inseparable sound, as the corporal pleasure of rhythm combines with and becomes indistinguishable from the fear of uncontrollability, madness, redundancy, circularity, and boredom equally possible within aural recurrence.

The direct references to gossip such as "'Tis said," "Some say," and "As gossips tell" are straightforward examples of the way in which language might emphasize its repeated, heard quality. By extension, gossip structures Robinson's parodic engagement with *Lyrical Ballads*, an engagement that asserts her receptive and repetitive position as echoer of scenes and language. As parody, or "song beside," Robinson's gossiping techniques may truly be said to think through what it means to speak from the margins.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, forms and figures of gossip are so prevalent throughout *Lyrical Tales*

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<sup>10</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks has done foundational work on the figure of gossip in her 1985 book *Gossip*, and I both learn and depart from her. Although Spacks deliberately avoids defining the term, which, as she says, "means many things to many people and even, at different times and in different contexts, to a single person" (4), she does, however, settle on a guideline: "Always it involves talk about one or more absent figures; always such talk occurs in a relatively small group" (4). Over the course of her book, gossip takes various shapes as a way to understand genres on the borderlands of literature which bear a metaphorical similarity to gossip, such as biography, autobiography, published letters, diaries, and popular journalism, as well as genres in the literary mainstream, such as drama and novels. Gossip functions as a metaphor for the intimate relationship between a narrator and a reader, as well as for the voyeuristic gaze of a narrator watching characters. Like gossip, these literary forms access depths through the play of surfaces by speculating about profound and unspoken elements based on little information. Spacks traces literary preoccupations with gossip and the ways in which it spreads in connective webs throughout narrative. But whereas one of the most exciting payoffs of gossip for Spacks is that it "provides the possibility of genuine dialogue, of meaning emerging gradually and cooperatively, or of meaning not articulated yet mutually understood," Robinson's gossip is more cynical about the possibility of true mutuality (17). If Spacks's gossip refuses the model of an active speaker and a passive listener in favor of two speakers engaged in collaborative speculation, Robinson's gossip, in contrast, asks what it means to respond to a speaker who never intended to include her in the conversation. This is certainly part of what is involved in Spacks's "mutually made meaning," because it involves a speaker that it simultaneously a listener—except that the conversation is one-sided. One speaker bears the burden of speaking and listening simultaneously, while the other is unaffected. This is both the structure of Robinson's engagement with *Lyrical Ballads*—which neither invites nor engages with her *Lyrical Tales*—as well as of the more local and explicit scenes of gossip throughout the volume, which emphasize the passivity of the speaker.

<sup>11</sup> The history of the term gossip tells the story of its politicization. A "gossip" originally denoted a close male or female intimate, deriving from the Old English word, "godsibb," for godfather or godmother. Throughout Western history, the term developed the negative and gendered connotations that it now bears. Although Chaucer's Wife of Bath could in 1386 make reference to "a gossib or a freend," in which "freend" stands in apposition to "gossip," the *Oxford English Dictionary* documents a sharp increase in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of the already-latent meaning of "a person, mostly a woman, of



that they may be interpreted as a poetics. Through conventional techniques that position her writing within a culture of mass publication and mass consumption, as well as formal experimentations with refrain and echo, gossip multiplies, awakening new ways to understand the development of poetry in the Romantic period. Whereas other Romantic poets have been celebrated for theorizing the poet as a speaker, Robinson theorizes the poet as a listener. If a poet for Wordsworth is “a man speaking to men,” Robinson’s poetics of gossip asks us to think about poetry as a “woman listening to men.”<sup>12</sup>

The figure of the speaking ear, or writing reader, enters *Lyrical Tales* as a structure of allusive interaction between Robinson’s volume and Wordsworth and Coleridge’s. The first poem of *Lyrical Tales*, “All Alone,” addresses the authors of *Lyrical Ballads* by inverting the structure of “We Are Seven” (*Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* 182-187). In “We Are Seven,” a presumably male narrator argues with a young girl about how many siblings she has. Because two of the siblings are dead, the narrator reasons that they do not count as part of the family community. The little girl insists that they do, and even counts herself among them with the inclusive first person plural pronoun in the title and refrain, “We Are Seven.” In contrast, “All Alone” involves an argument between a presumably female narrator and a young boy. The narrator tells the boy that although everyone in his family has died, he is not alone because the narrator herself has been watching over him. The boy vehemently rejects this suggestion and repetitively asserts his inverted, and similarly titular, refrain—that he is “All Alone.”

The refrain “all alone” sets up a rich and complicated interaction with *Lyrical Ballads*. First, the line is, in itself, an echo of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s verse. It

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light and trifling character, esp. one who delights in idle talk; a newsmonger, a tattler” (*OED*). In Joseph Addison’s 1716 remark in the *Freeholder*—“A Gossip in Politics is a Slattern in her Family”—Addison compacts many elements of this definition. Conspicuously feminized, Addison’s “Gossip” is shamed for speaking in the public sphere of “Politics.” Addison here links women’s speech to sexual lasciviousness, a powerful trope in which two forms of agency are made to work against one another simultaneously. Even the Wife of Bath, married five times, and at once highly verbal and openly desirous, illustrates this powerful conflation. Spacks’s study of gossip challenges these chauvinist frameworks, and reclaims gossip as a legitimate form of feminine interaction. Robinson in particular benefits from a feminist analysis. As a celebrated beauty whose poetry was persistently cast in sexualized terms, she suffered acutely from the same dynamic of oppression that is at work in Addison’s remark. For example, one typical review from a 1791 issue of the *Gentleman’s Magazine* suggests that if Robinson had been less endowed with “beauty and captivating manners,” “her poetical taste might have been confined in its influence” (quoted in Pascoe’s introduction to *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* 37). In addition, Robinson published her political tract, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination with Anecdotes*, in 1799—one year before *Lyrical Tales*—which suggests their proximity as forms of protest.

<sup>12</sup> Wordsworth’s formulation was published in his preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and so Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales* could not have been directly in conversation with this remark in particular. However, her volume picks up on submerged manifestations of this definition within the poems themselves.

ricochets throughout the liquid echoland that is “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” in such lines as “Alone, alone, all all alone / Alone on the wide wide Sea” (224-225); it appears in less conspicuous moments in “The Foster-Mother’s Tale” when the “poor mad youth . . . all alone, set sail by silent moonlight” (75, 78); and it repeats in more fragmented form in the multitude of characters depicted as being simply “alone,” such as the “Mad Mother,” “Old Susan” and the “Idiot Boy,” and “William” (from “Expostulation and Reply”)—to name just a few. So when the boy insists that he is “all alone,” he is characterizing himself not only within the world of the poem, but also as a figure intricately connected with the world of *Lyrical Ballads*. In fact, if the first poem usually introduces the overarching concerns of a given volume, this interaction between a female narrator and a boy speaking lines from another book could be read as a figure for the broader conversation between *Lyrical Tales* and *Lyrical Ballads* as a whole. Reading the conversation in this light adds another layer to the boy’s insistence on his solitude. For of course, this is precisely the stance that Wordsworth himself takes when he attempts to disassociate his volume from Robinson’s by changing the title to *Poems by W. Wordsworth*.<sup>13</sup> Robinson thus parodies Wordsworth by representing a version of him in the boy; as if she is suggesting that he attempts to obscure the relationship between *Lyrical Tales* and *Lyrical Ballads* by saying, like the boy to the narrator (insistently, perhaps even wishfully), “surely, I AM LEFT ALONE!” (150).

In typically Robinsonian fashion, the poem’s tone is indeterminate. Stuart Curran reads the boy as an existential figure who looks grimly toward modernity: “The unaccommodated child who stands at the gateway to *Lyrical Tales* is a totally existential figure, simply and irremediably cut off” (“Mary Robinson’s *Lyrical Tales* in Context” 32). Certainly, the story of an impoverished boy who gradually loses all of his family members, including his dog (who, to top it all off, even “grew mad” [97] before dying in a lighting storm—but not before the boy’s pet goat dies by falling off a cliff, its little bell “tink’ling” [93]<sup>14</sup>), is most immediately a tragic one. However, the over-the-top, slapstick deaths, paired with the repetitive and sing-song quality of the lines raises the question of whether this is ultimately a comedy—albeit an ugly one. By the end, the boy does strike a rather ridiculous picture. In stanza after stanza, the narrator undercuts boy’s seclusion: “Thou art not, Urchin, left alone” (12) she repeats. But just as often, the boy cries, “I wander’d, FRIENDLESS—and ALONE!” (114) His insistence becomes almost shrill, and the image that rises half-suppressed in the reader’s mind is one of a child fussing and refusing an embrace. The assertion of aloneness simultaneously

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned above, Eilenberg discusses the way in which this desire was also motivated by Wordsworth’s crumbling relationship with Coleridge.

<sup>14</sup> This image is possibly an allusion to Maria’s little goat in Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, as well as *Tristram Shandy*.

questions the very aloneness it imagines.<sup>15</sup> What is the child's investment in isolation? The poem at least raises the possibility of his iterations being all part of a sustained tantrum, which allows us to read the boy as a parody of the inspired, suffering and solitary male that would later embody Romantic imaginations of genius from Wordsworth's *Prelude* to Byron's *Manfred* to Caspar David Friedrich's "Wanderer above the Sea of Fog." The darkly comedic undertones in "All Alone" resonate most powerfully when read in conversation with *Lyrical Ballads*. For the phrase "all alone" is ironic not only because the narrator undercuts its message, but also because the allusion itself is the means by which Robinson creates a connection with Wordsworth and Coleridge's poetry. The words automatically empty themselves of their literal meaning by bridging the gap between the two volumes.

Reading the relationship between the boy and the narrator as another comment on the relationship between two poems and, by extension, two volumes, solves a central confusion within "All Alone": the fact that the intimacy that the narrator professes with the boy seems to be entirely one-sided. Whereas in "We Are Seven," the narrator "met a little cottage girl" (*Lyrical Ballads* 100, l.5) with whom he was presumably unacquainted until that moment, in "All Alone," the narrator professes to have known the little boy for years; "I know thee well!" she asserts (13), remembering him from the time before tragedy struck, when he would sit on his "lovely mother's knee" (38), and afterwards, when he would wander in despair. What is strange about this intimacy is that it is only felt by the narrator. She knows the boy, but the boy seems barely to register the narrator's presence. In the lines, "I know thee well! thy yellow hair / In silky *waves* I oft have seen" (13-14, emphasis added) as well as, "Thy roguish smile, thy playful mien / Were all *to me*, poor Orphan, known" (16-17, emphasis added), the verbs of perception are one-sided, and persistently position the narrator as a reader of her own tale. She tells, "And oft I heard thee deeply groan, / That thou, poor boy, art left alone" (23-24) and in similar vein, "I heard thee sigh thy artless woes; / I heard thee, till the day-star shone / In darkness weep—and weep alone!" (34-36). Why would the narrator "oft" hear the child groan and cry alone, without comforting him? Why would she allow him to weep alone all night until daylight? It is possible that the narrator is simply an indolent bystander to the boy's sorrow; but especially given the way in which we have been primed to understand this poem as written in response to Wordsworth and Coleridge, the poem asks us to read the narrator herself as a reader.

Rather than presenting herself as a creator or author, the speaker of "All Alone" narrates through verbs of reception that suggest a medium position neither fully inside nor outside the story. She is interestingly powerless as a speaker, for she does not even narrate the events in the tale. Instead, she begins by addressing a character further

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<sup>15</sup> As in Gertrude's "The lady protests too much, methinks" (*Hamlet* 3.2.217), or Mark Antony's "Brutus is an honourable man" (*Julius Caesar* 3.2.82).

inside the frame: "Ah! wherefore by the Church-yard side, / Poor little LORN ONE, dost thou stray?" (1-2). We pick up some of the exposition in her questions to the boy, but for the most part the child tells his own story. The narrator comments on his words and disagrees with them, but she does not change the content of what he says. When she describes her experience of witnessing the child's struggle, she chooses verbs that are particularly rich in the context of reading: "I have seen / Thy tiny footsteps print the dew" (115-6); "I mark'd thee" (123); "I follow'd thee" (127); "I heard thee" (129). The verb "print" hints at a world of letters and pages; "mark" submerges a metaphor of physical marks on a page; "Follow" evokes the reader's role in tracing the movements of a plot; and "hear" suggests the receptive position of the listener, within the common trope of the poem as delivered by a speaker.

Robinson's narrator makes literal and embodied the imagined companionship that the reader creates with a character. In her final words of the poem, before the boy takes over to assert, in contradiction, his conviction of his solitude, the narrator urges her one-sided affiliation:

I follow'd thee, along the dale  
And up the woodland's shad'wy way:  
I heard thee tell thy mournful tale  
As slowly sunk the star of day:  
Nor, when its twinkling light had flown,  
Wert thou a wand'rer, all alone. (127-132)

She "follows" the boy in the cognitive sense of tracing a sequence of plot events; even her own sequential position is that of the follower since, as a listener, she comes after the original text. The term "dale" and the types of movement it requires share these dually mental and physical senses. Most immediately, a dale is a valley, a movement of descent to counter the ascension of the following lines, "And up." This down and up movement evokes the vicissitudes of plot, which traditionally, in the ghost of a metaphor that dates back to fortune's wheel, follow an up and down pattern. But in nineteenth-century England, "dale" also meant "A portion or share of land; *spec.* a share of a common field, or portion of an undivided field indicated by landmarks but not divided off" (*OED*). Thus the aural association between "dale" and "tale," created by rhyme, suggests the possibility of physical togetherness within the imaginative world of the "tale." The image of following the child while he tells his "mournful tale" is a strange one if we imagine the boy speaking for a whole day, all the while unaware of a companion. However, if the narrator is in fact a reader, her reading by the slowly sinking light makes perfect sense. In this way, the "star of day" hangs pendant between two worlds: the reader's and the character's, sinking simultaneously in both. This embodiment of the imaginative togetherness of reader and character intensifies the

charge behind the narrator and the boy's argument over aloneness and community. In contrast to the tradition of the enlightened book, Robinson foregrounds the book's incapacity for reciprocal relationship. The "print" and "mark[s]" of the human character and printed characters both leave their impression on the listening narrator, but refuse to be affected in their turn.

By subtly characterizing her narrator as part-insider, part-outsider, Robinson unsettles the borders of inclusion and exclusion. Her narrator desires and insists on inclusivity, but remains a marginal figure, even within her own poem. This paradoxical situation—a narrator excluded from her narrative—parodies Wordsworth's imagination of newly inclusive conversation, conversation that expands the limits of poetry. For Robinson, poetry is a conversation from which voices remain carefully culled. Her narrator parodies that exclusion through her comedic argument with the boy who is at once a boy and a book and Wordsworth and Coleridge.

## 2. "'Tis said": Gossip

A volume in conversation with a volume about conversation, *Lyrical Tales* parodies Wordsworth's aim to "ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure" in a way that activates both the traditions of critique and of reverence inherent in parody's "song beside." For if Robinson's poetic conversations are far from decorous, so are Wordsworth's. Both poets focus on the language and stories of the dispossessed—whether vagrants, children, madwomen, idiot boys, or convicts, on Wordsworth's part—or peasant women, Indian slaves, fugitives, criminals, Negro girls, or gypsies, on Robinson's. Nor is the representation of gossip in itself unique to Robinson's volume. In "The Thorn," a meandering gossip speculates ("No more I know, I wish I did" [155]), repeats himself ("There's no one knows, as I have said" [162]), and cites the varying reports of a general, unspecified community ("some will say / She hanged her baby on the tree, / Some say she drowned it in the pond" [214-216]). But one important difference between Robinson's gossip and Wordsworth's is in their approach to individuality. Whereas Wordsworth's narrator in "The Thorn" is a breathing, bumbling individual with characteristic speech patterns, realistic mental lapses, and a story rooted to a specific trauma and time, Robinson's gossip emphasizes a troubling interchangeability between both speaker(s) and listener(s).

Throughout *Lyrical Tales*, gossip works to multiply and generalize the speaking voice, along with the affect that the speaking voice describes, giving the impression that the story at hand is not authored by a single identity, but rather that it approximates and synthesizes the shared impressions of a community. In "The Mistletoe," the power of the titular herb is introduced as a shared experience:

A magic bough, which DRUIDS old  
 Its sacred mysteries enroll'd;  
 And which, or gossip Fame's a liar,  
 Still warms the soul with vivid fire. (32-35)

Sanctioned by ancient druids as well as by the general voice of "gossip Fame," the magic of the mistletoe overwhelms the boundaries of particular experience. That the plot events are determined by the magnetism of ancient myth and confirmed by the common talk of fame suggests that they are inevitable, predetermined, and communal. If "This MISTLETOE was doom'd to be / The talisman of Destiny" (38-39), this destiny is a shared one: "Beneath its ample boughs we're told / Full many a timid Swain grew bold" (40-41). Under those plentiful boughs, the entire community is affected, a fact that "we're told" by an untraceable authority, as multiple as the communal "we" that "we're" as readers lumped into. Opinion similarly expands in "Mistress Gurton's Cat," in which we learn that "All liked Grimalkin, passing well!" (13). In the well-known conventions of gossip, the cat is introduced as generally sympathetic: "All liked" her, and in this communal feeling we as readers are invited to join.<sup>16</sup> Contrasting with a mode of thought or speech that glorifies the individual experience of the speaker, this diffused consciousness incorporates the shared feelings of a group and in this way puts the affirmative notion of agency into question.

In addition to cultivating a shared voice through generalized attitude, gossip decenters the authority of the poem's speaker and further refuses agency by shifting the burden of authorship either towards or away from the reader's expectation: either the tale's outcome is foreclosed by convention, or the tale shrugs off liability for its own content. In the poem that begins, "This farmer, as the tale is told — / Was somewhat cross, and somewhat old" (11-12), we can easily guess the plot. An old, jealous husband has a young, pretty wife: these are types, and the events of their lives are predictable. In this way, the speaker does not author the tale as much as she recalls a tale with which we are already familiar. She drily calls attention to this passivity through the parenthetical aside, "as the tale is told," which puts the telling of the story into the passive voice even as it makes clear that these events are *already* told — what we expect and half-remember is precisely what we will hear. In addition to calling attention to predetermined plots, gossip resists authority by functioning as a disclaimer. In the sentence, "One day, report, for ever busy, / Resolv'd to make Dame Gurton easy" (41-42) the speaker characterizes "report" as "for ever busy," thus refusing responsibility for a story that turns out to be false. The fault for falseness lies with "report," which is

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<sup>16</sup> The fact that Mistress Gurton alone resists the cat's appeal immediately puts her on the outside of this community and sets her up as the character in need of education (which she receives in the final moral, after she foolhardily hangs the cat).

the agent of the narrative both grammatically and factually. That the events turn out to be untrue is no wonder since, after all, we have already been warned that report is “busy.” If we take “busy” to mean not only in the sense of “industrious,” but also “active in what does not concern one; prying, inquisitive, gossiping; meddling, officious, interfering” (*OED*), then the same force both authors and disqualifies the tale—gossip, whose agency meddles and muddles.

This latter technique of warning against the authority of her own voice creates a fascinating ventriloquy effect, splitting the narrator from herself. In a neutral context, such as the line, “Some say that a black gown she wore” (98), the effect is subtle. The character may or may not have worn a black dress, but the uncertainty of this event is not hugely important to the plot events or to the reputation of the characters. But in a more charged setting, the ventriloquy allows the narrator to deflect blame for casually cruel words. In “Deborah’s Parrot,” fame, not the narrator, can be accused of harshness:

*The tattler, Fame, has said that she  
A Spinster’s life had long detested,  
But ‘twas her quiet destiny,  
Never to be molested!—  
And had Miss DEBBY’s form been grac’d  
Fame adds,—She had not been so chaste;—* (15-20, emphasis added)

Although the speaker deflects the credit of these lines to “Fame” (not exactly the same thing as gossip, but defined synonymously in the *OED* as “public report, common talk”), this deflection itself is a convention of gossip—the speaker disavows authority along with guilt, and then proceeds to utter barbs. Who is suggesting that Miss Debby is unattractive and unprincipled? The speaker even coyly condemns Fame for such allegations by calling it a “tattler,” an ambivalent epithet that at once ascribes authority (in the meaning of “one who reveals secrets”) and censure (in the meaning of “an idle talker”).

This generalized, impersonal, strangely passive gossip foregrounds listening in a way that confuses the distinction between speaker and listener. Robinson conventionally adds a reference to orality in order to signal the presence of gossip. The phrases analyzed above, such as “we’re told,” “as the tale is told,” and “some say,” all emphasize speaking and imply an actual conversation. In “Mistress Gurton’s Cat,” anaphora heightens this effect:

One day, report,<sup>17</sup> for ever busy,  
 Resolv'd to make Dame Gurton easy;  
 A Neighbour came, with solemn look,  
 And thus, the dismal tidings broke.  
 "Know you, that poor GRIMALKIN died  
 Last night, upon the pent-house side?  
 I heard her for assistance call;  
 I heard her shrill and dying squall!  
 I heard her, in reproachful tone,  
 Pour, to the stars, her feeble groan! (41-50)

Whereas many of the other scenes of gossip describe a tale that has been passed from speaker to listening speaker, this passage conflates the *actual events* of the tale with sound. Based on sound alone—a fact emphasized through the triply-repeated assertion of "I heard"—we are to understand that the cat has died. Thus the capacity to comprehend factual events depends on, but is also limited to, the capacity to listen. Robinson's scenes of gossip make the speaker passive through a shift of agency that begins on the level of grammar: if the speaker's main verb is "I heard," then a grammatical tension arises between the traditionally hierarchized "event" of the tale, which now appears in a subordinate clause, and the act of listening, which suddenly takes precedence in the grammatical order of the sentence. By foregrounding her speakers' capacity to hear, Robinson troubles the primacy of speaking.

Robinson's gossip holds an ambivalent position in *Lyrical Tales*, constantly recurring but refusing and confusing interpretation. The volume's explicit stance towards gossip is one of moralistic rejection. "The Granny Grey" describes a bitter old gossip, who "Had pass'd her busy hours away, / In talking of the Men" (3-4), making "Scandal her pleasure—and her trade" (10). Her jealousy over the youthful courtship between her grand-daughter and the handsome William lead her to plot against the lovers. However, William discovers her plot and marshals the villagers against her by convincing them that she is a "fierce, ill-omen'd" (75) grey owl; they rush on her in the night, and bear her away to the cries of "A witch, a witch!" (119), causing her to repent and allow the lovers to marry, a decision that is smugly presented as a lesson learned:

And should this TALE, fall in the way  
 Of LOVERS CROSS'D, or GRANNIES GREY, —  
 Let them confess, 'tis made to prove—

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<sup>17</sup> Again, "report" is not precisely the same thing as gossip, but is a word used to define gossip in the *OED*.



*The wisest heads, — TOO WEAK FOR LOVE!* (129-132)<sup>18</sup>

“Deborah’s Parrot” similarly features a spiteful “ancient Maiden” (2), who with “watchful Ears and Eyes” (7) specializes in gossip:

Miss DEBBY had a PARROT, who,  
If Fame speaks true,  
Could prate, and tell what neighbours did,  
And yet the saucy rogue was never chid! (45-48)

When Miss Debby eventually marries an old and jealous man, the prating parrot makes her the object of suspicion and thus—in disturbing logic—Miss Debby brings domestic violence upon herself: “And many a drubbing DEBBY bought / For mischief, she her PARROT taught!” (153-154). Yet even in this world of linear consequence and conservative values, Robinson’s morals have the tendency to come off as glib, humorous, and exaggeratedly rote. “Deborah’s Parrot” ends:

Thus, SLANDER turns against its maker;  
And if this little Story reaches  
A SPINSTER, who her PARROT teaches,  
Let her a better task pursue,  
And here, the certain VENGEANCE view  
Which surely will, in TIME, O’ERTAKE HER. (155-160)

The effect of a moralizing conclusion is to reduce the action of the poem into a lesson. Many contemporary commentators on Robinson’s poetry avoid mentioning her use of morals, as though to make these conventional and conservative conclusions disappear.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Pascoe calls attention to the ambivalence of this tale in her “Introduction” to *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*: “While poems like [“The Granny Grey”] seem to mock female tale tellers, it is worth noting that the putative author of the poem—Robinson first published it in the *Morning Post* as the offering of Tabitha Bramble—is a figure who, emboldened by her age and crone status, casts a jaundiced eye on the lifestyles of the rich and famous” (56).

<sup>19</sup> Ashley Cross criticizes the final, moralizing lines of “The Fugitive” by saying: “The final lines fall flat because the connection of self and other is everywhere thwarted in Robinson’s volume. But they also fall flat because of their repetitive nature. Whether Robinson intends it or not, the effect of this gesture—a gesture that should stress the authority of the ballad questioner—is to undercut the speaker’s authority” (598). Although I agree that Robinson continually thwarts the connection of self and other, the conclusion of “The Fugitive” is not the only instance of this thwarting itself being undercut or complicated. Cross fails to acknowledge that the strong moral with which “The Fugitive” concludes is typical throughout *Lyrical Tales*. Betsy Bolton is an exception to the trend of avoiding discussion of Robinson’s morals. She writes: “The moralizing conclusions of the tales repeatedly disrupt the naivete they ostensibly support, to

But Robinson's embrace of this convention is subtle. For even while she provides a moral where Wordsworth refuses one, Robinson's ultimate ethical stance is ambivalent. The quotation above states the message the reader should extract from "Deborah's Parrot": the scheming spinster suffers in the end, as her manipulations finally enmesh her—in other words, gossip is wrong. If the moral abstracts a meaning from physical events, these lines wittily abstract the characters themselves by etherealizing them into fable, where animals offer figures for a human trait, and the occasion to moralize. Although throughout the poem, the parrot had been an actual bird, the concluding moral reveals the parrot to be a metaphor for a person who imitates and spreads the language of others. This metaphorizing metamorphosis activates the interpretive function of the moral, which asks the reader to re-evaluate what came before in light of a meaning. But it also has the effect of implying that the moral itself is some sort of joke or pun. If one of the main characters, the parrot, is not a "real" character, but instead a metaphor for a gossipier that supports the moral, then the moral stands in the same position as a punchline: the fact that the parrot is a comic character throughout the tale further strengthens this link between the moral and the punchline of a joke. For throughout the body of the poem, gossiping words impel the plot and provide the humor. At intervals, the parrot cries, "*Who with the Parson toy'd? O fie!*", which, in the style of the catch-phrase, unifies the action and becomes increasingly funny in each new iteration. This humor puts the reader in the complicated position of relishing the very speech which at the end of the poem is identified as morally wrong. Thus convention ties itself in knots: the same readers who laugh at the punchline become implicated in the poem's action and then vilified in the final moral. Whether playful or strict, conventional or mocking, Robinson refuses the certainty of judgment.

Betsy Bolton has persuasively shown how Robinson's morals paradoxically introduce a worldliness to the poems by censuring not the apparently immoral action, but rather the betrayal of that action to the public. She points out that in "The Mistletoe," the young wife is criticized not for having an affair, but rather for being careless enough to betray herself: "Cheating on one's husband is taken for granted: the arena of moral action restricts itself to the question of how a flirtation or affair is to be managed" (743). I would like to extend this analysis of the *Tales'* moral cynicism to consider the way in which the poems reflect upon their imagined audience. As Bolton notes, a high proportion of Robinson's morals are addressed to women. I would add

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promulgate instead a mode of social cynicism, especially in cases of sexual impropriety . . . The potential for change sketched within the *Tales* lies instead in the reader's response to a repeated incommensurability of moral and story: to notice the mismatch is almost inevitably to become a more cynical reader" (42). Heather Glen in *Vision and Disenchantment: Blakes's Songs and Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* and Alan Richardson in *Literature, Education, Romanticism* both discuss the use of moral tags in the Romantic period more broadly.

that of these morals, all condemn gossip either directly or indirectly.<sup>20</sup> If the moral is a moment when the speaker turns to address the reader—thus raising the possibility of direct, intimate interaction between the book and the eyes that read it—there is a degree of wryness to this address, since these morals provide canned wisdom to a mass reader. Neither the highly conventional moral, nor the imagined reader (often referred to as “women,” “spinsters,” “maids,” or “grannies”) has any pretense to individuality. The morals often self-reflexively refer to their own passage from the page to the eye or ear: “Deborah’s Parrot” concludes, “*And if this little Story reaches / A SPINSTER, who her PARROT teaches, / Let her...*” (156-158, emphasis added) and similarly, “The Granny Grey” ends, “*And should this TALE, fall in the way / Of LOVERS CROSS’D, or GRANNIES GREY,— / Let them...*” (129-131, emphasis added). Thus the same indiscriminate, branching, maze-mouthed network is imagined here to disseminate both gossip and the tale itself. The tale may or may not “fall in the way” of the reader, just as gossip circulates along unpredictable paths, whether by means of blurring parrots or unwise grannies. Robinson’s phrase, “this little Story,” plays in fascinating triangulation with the well-known etymology for stanza, “little room.” “[T]his little Story,” as a poem, translates to “this little *Stanza*,” a substitution supported by the aural similarity between the initial *st* sounds. But a little story, or an anecdote, is uncomfortably close to gossip, which in turn seems perfectly suited to a little room—for where, if not in the intimate confines of a domestic space, does gossip take place? Thus Robinson links story, stanza, and room in an unpredictable, almost unconscious circulation of sounds that suggests the permeability of each, and binds the fate of the stanza to that of the little story, or gossip.

### 3. “Re-echo’d”: Crowds of Sounds, Print Culture, Reduplication

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<sup>20</sup> The moral of “The Mistletoe” condemns Mistress Homespun’s rash, unpremeditated speech that reveals her scandalous extra-marital affair: “’Tis thus, to check a rival’s sway, / That Women oft themselves betray; / While VANITY, alone, pursuing, / They rashly prove, their own undoing” (108-111); The moral of “Mistress Gurton’s Cat” reveals the folly of those who profess what they do not mean: “Thus, often, we with anguish sore / The *dead*, in clam’rous grief deplore; / Who, were they once *alive* again / Would meet the sting of cold disdain! / For FRIENDS, whom trifling faults can sever, / Are *valued most*, WHEN LOST FOR EVER!” (130-135); The moral of “Deborah’s Parrot” criticizes gossipers: “Thus, SLANDER turns against its makers; / And if this little Story reaches / A SPINSTER, who her PARROT teaches, / Let her a better task pursue, / And here, the certain VENGEANCE view / Which surely will, in TIME, O’ERTAKE HER” (155-160). The moral of “The Fortune-Teller” warns against telling secrets: “Thus, Fortune pays the Lover bold! / But, gentle Maids, should Fate / Have any *secret* yet untold,— / Remember, *simple* KATE!” (159-162); and the moral of “The Granny Grey” relishes the physical abuse and embarrassment of a single woman who makes “Scandal her pleasure—and her trade” (10): “And should this TALE, fall in the way / Of LOVERS CROSS’D, or GRANNIES GREY,— / Let them confess, ’tis made to prove— / *The wisest heads*,— TOO WEAK FOR LOVE!” (129-132).

So far I have discussed how Robinson's gossip functions both as a structure of interaction between *Lyrical Ballads* and *Lyrical Tales*, as well as a dominant motif throughout *Lyrical Tales* itself, in both cases enacting the ways in which marginal, repetitive speech and unequal scenes of listening—in which one participant bears an incommensurable weight of receptivity and response—refuse the traditional value placed on individual agency. This parodies Wordsworth's formulation of a poet as a "man speaking to men" by imagining nightmarish and cynical scenes of women listening to men. By amplifying the formulaic quality of characters and plots, gossip generalizes the speaking voice; by amplifying the formulaic quality of morals, gossip circulates along the same branching and unpredictable paths as the mass publications consumed by a faceless reading public. Generalization thus runs two ways, towards the speaker as well as the listener: a passive and listening speaker both imports alien, unkind agencies who speak in untraceable incognito as "fame" and reports rather than narrates, the "I heard" standing as main verb and risking the primacy of the "event." A mass reader receives language by chance, amorphous and inhuman in its blank unknowability. In what follows I will explore the stakes of Robinson's poetics of gossip by considering the way in which gossip refracts and redoubles into extended forms of repetition, such as echo and refrain.

As Lucy Newlyn has shown, technological developments such as the first hand-operated iron-frame printing press, the Fourdrinier paper making machine, and stereotyping, made cheaper books available and widely increased the availability of the printed word, developments which, as Newlyn puts it, heralded in many ways "the rise of the reader" in early nineteenth-century England and created complicated responses to this new mass-reading audience (3). Newlyn describes the way in which technology helped to transform the author's imagination of a reader from an intimate friend—an image supported by the coterie practice of reading a manuscript aloud to a small group of intimates—into a nightmarish multitude, faceless and many-faced, unknowable and seething as De Quincey's sea of London faces. In this way, Newlyn shows how the author's anxiety has less to do with figures of the past, as Harold Bloom argues, but rather with a troubling futurity—the imagination of public reception.<sup>21</sup>

Robinson's staging of a one-sided conversation with *Lyrical Ballads* in her *Lyrical Tales* plays on this simultaneous power and abjectness of the mass reader, for although the masses hold a frightening power over the author, they are dehumanized to the extent that they can never be thought of as individuals. Robinson's imagery of gossip multiplies both at the level of structural engagement and local figure. Alongside her stylistic, figurative, and rhythmic echoes of *Lyrical Ballads*, there proliferate uncontrollable parrots whose refrains double as both blurted gossip and the refrain of

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<sup>21</sup> Andrew Bennett also discusses the "anxiety of reception," but in the context of Keats in *Keats, Narrative, and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*.

the stanza itself (“Deborah’s Parrot, a Village Tale”), witch-women who make gossip their livelihood (“The Granny Grey, a Love Tale”), and fortune tellers who cross-dress and plot (“The Fortune-Teller, A Gypsy Tale”), proving that listeners are not what they seem. All of these poems could simultaneously be read as meditations on the loss of control faced by the author after publication. Like gossip, publication moves discourse from the private into the public spheres, a movement which, after the development of mass publication, leaves authors particularly helpless. Robinson thus asks what it means to be in community—especially when you are not invited into that community. By way of an answer, she makes *Lyrical Ballads* stand for the published book, which she proceeds playfully, instructively, and terrifyingly, to read.

Robinson’s brilliant engagement with “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” in her “The Haunted Beach” echoes an echoing poem in a way that foregrounds the concept of print order to ask about the source of sound. As many critics have noted, “The Haunted Beach” clearly addresses “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere.” Robinson’s ballad stanza dips and swings, plays, syncopates, and then reinvents itself all over again with at least as much alacrity as Coleridge’s. Like “Rime,” “The Haunted Beach” describes the ocean, and in both poems, the sounds of endlessly returning and recombining waves seem at once to spring from and to amplify the liquidity of the aural effects. In addition to sharing sound effects and setting, the poems share a preoccupation with guilt and a past that returns as perpetually as the waves themselves. In “The Haunted Beach,” a band of ghosts appear to a fisherman who, as we learn gradually over the course of the poem, has murdered one of the sailors and is doomed to waste his life away in tortured atonement. Like the Marinere whose crime of murdering an albatross fixates him, the fisherman is similarly “Bound by a strong and mystic chain” (77) to the scene of his crime, where the sea in whose waters he washed his bloody hands returns and returns.

As well noted as the similarities between the two poems is the fact that Coleridge read and appreciated “The Haunted Beach” when it appeared in the *Morning Post*. Writing to his friend Robert Southey, Coleridge exclaimed, “ay! that Woman has an Ear!” (*Collected Letters* 1: 576). Although Coleridge undoubtedly acknowledges Robinson’s poem, the common critical tendency to read Coleridge’s notice in a complimentary light does not reveal the full complexity of Coleridge’s praise.<sup>22</sup> For the sake of context, I quote the full passage:

In the Morning Post was a poem of fascinating Metre by Mary Robinson — ‘twas on Wednesday, Feb. 26. — & entitled the Haunted Beach. I was so struck with it

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<sup>22</sup> For instance, Daniel Robinson legitimizes Robinson through Coleridge’s problematic comment: “As fastidious as Coleridge was in his taste for poetry, therefore, his appreciation of Robinson’s metrical skill is no small praise” (127).

that I sent to her to desire that [it] might be preserved in the Anthology — She was extremely flattered by the Idea of it's being there, as she idolizes you & your Doings. So if it be not too late, I pray you, let it be in — if you should not have received that Day's paper, write immediately that I may transcribe it — it falls off sadly to the last — wants Tale — & Interest; but the Images are new & very distinct — that 'silvery carpet' is so *just*, that it is unfortunate it should *seem* so bad — for it is *really* good — but the Metre — ay! that Woman has an Ear.  
(*Collected Letters* 1: 576)

The famous praise of Robinson's poem comes tacked onto an apology for the poem's failures. According to Coleridge, it "falls off sadly to the last," and "wants Tale — & Interest." This censure is particularly odd when looking at "The Haunted Beach" itself—for the poem in fact climaxes in the final stanzas. Although we see ghosts and guilt throughout, it is only in the final chilling lines that we witness the crime: from the disorienting perspective of moonlight, our eyes move with the silver light that "mark'd the sailor reach the land, / And mark'd his murderer wash his hand / Where the green billows play'd" (61-63). The final two stanzas after the crime's revelation tell how the fisherman bears an unbearable guilt—and how for thirty years he has been bound to this spot. The poem concludes with the clench of suspense, which self-reflexively binds the reader at the same time as it describes the fisherman's bondage:

Bound by a strong and mystic chain,  
He has not power to stray;  
But destined misery to sustain,  
He wastes, in solitude and pain,  
A loathsome life away. (77-81)

In other words, Coleridge's criticism does not suit the content of the poem, but rather the form of the interaction. For he is engaged in the routine practice of relegating women's words to the surface, while reserving the depth for men. In the same way, Coleridge praises Robinson's "Images," and a toss-off epithet, "silvery carpet" (sparkling and superficial) while condescendingly regretting that the poem itself "should *seem* so bad—for it is *really* good." Thus contained and controlled, the poem can be safely enjoyed. Indeed, in its proper context, Coleridge's celebrated line, "but the Metre—ay! that Woman has an Ear," sounds like objectification of the female body. His exclamation "ay!" has an objectifying, leering sound when followed by the markedly embodied, "that Woman has an Ear." Coleridge focuses here on Robinson's gender, at the same time as he turns her poetic expertise into a body part. The ear is a receptive,

penetrative organ which further connects it to female sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Coleridge constructs a transfigured blazon, imported into the world of literary criticism, by which Coleridge comments on Robinson's skill by imagining it as part of her physical self, which he unpieces and chivalrously praises.

Although Robinson could not have seen Coleridge's letter to Southey, "The Haunted Beach" can be read as a sustained meditation on the roles of speaking and listening. One of the main preoccupations of the poem is sound itself. The first stanza opens onto a crashing world: "And, all around, the deaf'ning roar, / Re-echo'd on the chalky shore, / By the green billows made" (7-9). The phrase "all around" should immediately chime against the ear's memory of the important phrase, "all alone," which, as we have seen, establishes a connection with *Lyrical Ballads* in the opening poem of *Lyrical Tales* by echoing one of Wordsworth and Coleridge's central phrases, most prominent in "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere." Here Robinson slyly identifies the sounds in her seascape as "re-echo[ing]," which has a double sense here: first, it points to the sounds *in* the poem, and second, it points to the sounds *of* the poem, as they echo the cadences of Coleridge. Indeed, Coleridge similarly uses the phrase "all around" to create a landscape of sound:

The ice was here, the ice was there,  
The ice was all around:  
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,  
Like noises in a swound! (57-60)

Robinson's jarring transference of agency from the re-echoing roar to the green billows ("By the green billows made") establishes the waves as mysterious actors in the poem. Robinson creates a billowing, bellowing world rendered passive under environmental agents of noise. These external speakers, the green waves, are Coleridge's sounds, invading the landscape both visually and aurally.

If the noises in "The Haunted Beach" can be read as echoing those of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," Robinson's imagery seems equally sensitive to influence. For

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, Othello's fearful reference to Desdemona's "greedy ear" suggests this connection. Martin Jay further discusses the materiality of the ear: "The physical configuration of the ear was also significant for Derrida. In the familiar terms of Nietzsche and Bataille, the ear could be understood as a labyrinth (the spiraling canals of the inner ear) and a vibrating membrane (the tympanum or middle ear), which produced delay and distancing. Like other organs opening to the world—most notably the anus and vagina—it problematized the distinction between inner and outer, producing a sensation of uncanniness. Even the different sizes of ears, Derrida suggested, could imply resistance to sameness or what one commentator has called 'earsplitting.' Thus, hearing the 'glas' or knell of the bell was no less important than looking into the 'glass' of the mirror" (514).

haunting this beach (already haunted by sounds) are ghosts “gliding hand in hand — / Where the green billows play’d” (26-27). The ghosts were once sailors, like the unfortunate crew in “Rime.” The same ghosts from Coleridge’s poem haunt Robinson’s, and in this way Robinson’s poem is haunted literally and figuratively, by Coleridge’s images (the ghosts) and by his influence (the idea of the ghosts). The nature of this collaboration is ambivalent, for although in “Rime,” the mariner murders the albatross, in “The Haunted Beach” it is the mariner himself who is murdered. The solitary fisherman washes the blood of his crime “where the green billows play’d” —in other words, the spreading refrain becomes imbricated both in the scene of poetic invasion, and the scene of responsive violence. By opening her voice to Coleridge’s, Robinson confuses the roles of speaker and listener. Her poem is, in one sense, spoken by an ear, the ear which so closely attends to the other poet. Coleridge’s vaguely sexualized compliment, “ay! that Woman has an Ear,” could be taken to refer not only to her facility with meter, but also to the care with which she has obviously listened to him. In this way, the poem is spoken by an audience. As Lucy Newlyn shows, this stance of “attending, listening, sympathizing, identifying, and echoing” is a particularly feminized one (232), and Robinson is both aware and critical of the receptive role that society has laid out for her.

On the one hand, echo belongs to the surface. As John Hollander writes, “Echoes are the reflections of sounds from solid surfaces,” and in this way they are the surface of the surface, that which makes a literal, reflecting exterior audible (*The Figure of Echo* 1). But echoes are also parodic, as Hollander goes on to explore at length. Narcissus mocks powerfully (12), and the figure of echo attains its most redoubtable drive when “her fragmentary response involves a pun or other alteration of sense” (26), when the echo breaks down sound in order to comment on the sense or nonsense of the originary speech. Thus echo is particularly poised for metacommentary, a position that complicates its seeming surface. Echo reflects as surface the deep concerns of the poem. In Robinson’s case, echo is particularly engaged with parodying and warping the absent cause, for of course echo is literally the sound (or by extension the symptom) of an absent cause, the Coleridgean voice whose waves return as newly sounding waves and ghosts. In this way Robinson’s echo constitutes both a surface figure and a parody of an absent interlocutor.

In her political tract, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination with Anecdotes*, Robinson turns the conventions of gossip to the form of public argumentation. By means of stories and anecdotes, she argues in this tract — released in 1799, or one year before *Lyrical Tales* — that women are equal to men, and that to cultivate this equality, women should be university educated. She frequently introduces her anecdotes with the verb “to hear,” for instance when she tells, “I remember hearing a man of education, an orator, a legislator, and a superficial admirer of the persecuted sex, declare, that ‘the greatest plague which society could meet with,



was a *literary woman!*" (65-66). She similarly points to the injustice of what is *not* heard: "[W]e hear of no national honours, no public marks of popular applause, no rank, no title, no liberal and splendid recompense bestowed on British literary women" (64). Robinson turns the conventional introduction to a tidbit of gossip, "I heard," to the purpose of political change as a subtle means of validating a stereotypically feminine discourse and forging links between private (gossiping) and public (political, published) speech. This level-shifting technique is parallel to that which she uses throughout *Lyrical Tales*: a figure so persistently associated with the surface as to be interchangeable with meanings for speech that is thoughtless, obvious, and trivial, doubles as a structure for argumentation.

Ultimately, Robinson's gossip poetics performs not only a kind of listening that upends any certain subject position but also a kind of listening that estranges even the human ear as the privileged receptacle for sound. Through her echoing refrains, Robinson re-wires attention and expectation, the human-oriented directionality of speech. For a refrain is a moment when the poem listens to itself: the poem remembers and repeats the poetic time that runs rhythmically through the work, remembers the sounds of lines before, and re-sounds them. The refrains in "The Haunted Beach" introduce a frightening indeterminacy into regularity. The green billows, which return as refrain at the end of each stanza (except the last) hold a mysterious power that is never fully revealed. What is the significance of these waves, resounding and resounding, and somehow bound up with the ghosts and guilt? At the end of the first stanza, the appearance of the waves is logical: they establish the setting, and introduce the crashing noise. In the second stanza, they heighten the emphasis on setting. But in the third stanza, the meaning of the waves begins to pull and slant: "The Fisherman beheld a band / Of spectres, gliding hand in hand — / Where the green billows play'd" (25-27). Rather than emphasizing the ghosts, the repetition instead falls on the waves, and in this way infuses the apparently ordinary with mystery. The following stanzas amplify the same effect. In the next stanza: "The clear moon mark'd the ghastly croud, / Where the green billows play'd" (35-36). In the next, we learn that the murdered mariner's corpse is laid near the shore: "And deep was made his sandy bed / Where the green billows play'd" (44-45). Ultimately, the waves lap the blood of the murderous crime: "And [the moon] mark'd his murd'rer wash his hand / Where the green billows play'd" (61-63). Because each action within the poem returns to the waves, the reader is taught to expect an explanation or cause from their green crashing. It is as though the waves are the agents of an inexplicable system — sublime, sinister, and utterly alien. Indeed, the implication of the word "play" collects layer after layer of context, increasingly indeterminate. The most logical meaning of "play" in this context suggests quick and continuous movement. But the teasing way in which the word "play" returns and suggests a significance which it always ultimately refuses to make clear, evokes the meaning of "to joke, trifle" (*OED*). In this way, the waves' play shifts between a verb of

intentionality and simple movement, plot and thoughtlessness. The poem foregrounds the waves as pure sound, indeed the pure sound of the poem itself: “And, all around, the deafening roar / Re-echoed on the chalky shore, / By the green billows made” (7-9). The first iteration of this haunting refrain rhymes not on “played” like most of the others do, but on the resonant verb “made.” Thus in introducing the roar of the waves *in* the poem and initiating meta-poetically the waves *of* the poem, the refrain figures sound itself as inhuman noise—made, but “by the green billows,” a tumult outside intention.

The animals that populate *Lyrical Tales*, like the inhuman agents of noise, the waves, suggest the uncontrollability and potential fear that comes with really listening. They figure an audience that cannot be known, an other listening. We have seen the complicated way in which “Deborah’s Parrot” simultaneously moralizes and undercuts its own message by, on the one hand, condemning gossip, while, on the other, relying on gossip to move the plot and provide the humor. But “Deborah’s Parrot” also turns refrain to amazing effect. For the poem’s unconventional refrain is only uttered three times in all 160 lines. The first time, the parrot mimics gossip: “*Who with the Parson toy’d? O fie!*” (58). Although we have not heard the refrain before this moment, it already has the status of repeated speech because we know that the parrot only speaks what he has heard. Once the dangerous, vulgar and thus incriminating words have been spoken, they are let loose into a mass of ears that have the power to repeat the sounds at any time. The speaker loses control—and the poem delights in this fearful possibility. For soon Deborah moves to another town and marries an old and jealous man. Of course, the parrot soon hints his uncontrollable line – “*Who with the Parson toy’d? O fie!*” (120) – which to the husband’s receptive imagination is guilt’s guarantee. The final time we hear the refrain is from the husband’s mouth as he in turn repeats what he has heard before beating Deborah (or, in Robinson’s piquant phrase “drubbing Debby” [153])—and introducing the ambivalent moral: don’t gossip (but enjoy gossip).

Part of the fear of repetition—of really listening—is a fear of madness. In “The Shepherd’s Dog,” Robinson meditates on the latent threat within refrain’s repetitions. She alternates between two refrains: the first guarantees a reassuring return—and the second threatens insanity. At the beginning of the poem, we learn about the close relationship between the shepherd and his dog. The last line of each stanza varies a description of the dog’s faithfulness, always using the words “The Shepherd’s Dog.” But as the poem progresses the dog gets older, and the word “MAD” creeps into the refrain. Suspense builds around the question of whether the dog will go mad, kill someone, or be killed. Robinson’s subtle pairing of the dog’s faithful returning with the threat of violent insanity, reveals that the two are always already linked. Refrains in this poem reveal the possibility of repetition to enact—or perhaps create—madness. The wave, the parrot, and the dog are all figures of repetition and return, a fact punned on by their position within the refrains of their respective poems. It is as though their

physical tendencies themselves (the waves' crashing, the parrot's repeating, the dog's following), rather than the motivations of the human ear, orchestrate the poems. In this way, Robinson also confuses the hierarchy of species, asking what it would mean to hear an alien intentionality, a poem "by the green billows made."

## Chapter Two

### **“Noisy guest”: Versions of Receptivity in John Clare’s Bird Poems**

The problem with being a guest in John Clare’s bird poems is that this role, rather than involving the expected entertainment, welcome, and hospitality, brings ruin. In this chapter I will explore how Clare questions the premise of civility by casting human interactions with birds in the terms of hospitality, evoking metaphors of guest and host, and with them attendant expectations of decorum. But rather than suggesting that the human’s relationship with birds can be resolved within the space of this guest/host metaphor—discovering a cross-species sense of propriety, vindicating human presence, or adjusting the human gaze to find some new, ethically correct mode of attunement to the other—Clare, on the contrary, dwells on the irreducible strangeness of dwelling itself, making the home an alien place, the guest a harbinger of danger, and the host a figure of random and unjustifiable power. I will discuss how Clare attempts to move beyond human forms of relationship and naming by experimenting in two contrasting ways with the trope of the speaking ear—one emphatically human, decorous, and “civilized”; the other emphatically animalistic and “uncivilized”. The first side of this experiment involves the speech act of invitation, while the second involves imitations of birdnoise. Through invitation, Clare implicates human civility with trespass into an animal world whose rules are unknown; by extension, he unsettles the poetic tradition of apostrophe and with it, the inherent value of the human muse. In birdnoise, Clare searches deeper for a way out of human signification by emphasizing the way in which this mode of speech refuses to signify in human terms, questioning what it means to communicate not only within the imaginative space of a guest/host or animal/human relationship, but also in the broader landscape of human poetic language itself. The birds’ speech renders the possibility of understanding between animals and humans impossible, and halts the workings of the human world. Both of these experiments, though on contrasting poles of a human spectrum of what is known as civility, posit versions of a speaking ear. Both obsess, in different ways, over the question of receptivity: what might it mean to open oneself utterly to another presence, to an incomprehensible sound? Both attempt to distort the poetic voice into a vehicle for that receptivity—into an ear. For Clare, listening is the central act in these poetic voicings. The speaking ear makes the speech of the poem out of an act of listening.

#### **1. “lets softly rove/ & list the nightingale”: Inviting the Ear**

The word that rhymes most frequently with “nest” in John Clare’s bird poems is “guest.” Because the nest is the home of the bird, one would expect that the rhyming word “guest” would apply to the one approaching the nest as a visitor. But as often as

not, Clare contorts the expected roles so that the birds are strangely made visitors to their own home, as in “The Landrail”; at other times, as in “The Yellowhammer’s Nest,” the birds play host to a guest whose presence introduces danger. The fact that the nest does not always represent the home in Clare’s guest/host metaphors—or that the birds are not always the proprietors of that home—suggests a conflict of perspective. In “The Landrail,” the weeders and mowers stumble on the landrail’s home, and yet the birds are pictured as guests:

& mowers on the meadow lea  
 Chance on their noisy guest  
 & wonder what the bird can be  
 That lays without a nest. (*Major Works* 233, ll. 49-52)<sup>24</sup>

Two perspectives collide in this stanza: the world of the mowers and the world of the birds. The mowers unwittingly discover where the birds live, but they do not understand why the animals could “lay without a nest.” In fact, as the speaker reveals in the next stanza, the birds do create nests in “simple holes” in the ground, but these holes recede unobserved by the mowers. What is home for the birds is strange for the mowers, and so the mowers perceive the birds themselves as strangers. The birds are unhomed both physically and imaginatively—by the arrival of their hosts, which destroys their nest, and by their hosts’ misrecognition of their habitat. It is a clumsy magic (the ill side of performative language) by which the humans stomp into the nest, see no nest, and in not seeing, destroy the nest. But of course in the world of the humans, the mowers themselves are at home. Their presence is legitimized by the business of agriculture, and this business makes them the proprietors and hosts of the field. What the birds comprehend as their home the mowers comprehend as *their* home or place of work, and Clare deftly registers this dissonance in small jolts of alarm on both side: the illogic of “chanc[ing]” on a guest (who would traditionally be invited and expected), the unpleasantness of a “noisy” guest, and the utter unrecognition of “what the bird can be” on the part of the mowers; and on the part of the birds, the grimly implied ruin of the nest, the fear inherent in the landrail’s noise, and the confusion of ruining another creature’s home and then calling that creature a guest in its newly strange surroundings. Because the mowers were always more powerful, their code takes precedence and the metaphor becomes one of irony and loss: even at home, the birds were guests.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> All citations from Clare’s poems are from this edition, and are hereafter cited by line number.

<sup>25</sup> For another reading of Clare’s bird poems that also considers the ways in which they mirror and critique human society, see Johanne Clare’s chapter “The Society of Nature: The Bird Poems” in her *John Clare and the Bounds of Circumstance* (164-194). Whereas Johanne Clare argues that Clare’s speaker “forget[s]” (174) his humanity when observing the birds, and that “[i]t is the poet’s inability to escape his

In “The Yellowhammers Nest,” the birds are the hosts of their nest, but the guest is an invasive and destructive presence. The speaker at the end of the poem imagines the possible death of the yellowhammer chicks in a metaphor that shifts with snake-like movement:

For snakes are known with chill & deadly coil  
 To watch such nests & seize the helpless young  
 & like as though the plague became a guest  
 Leaving a houseless home a ruined nest. (25-28)

A snake becomes a plague becomes a guest, metaphor eating metaphor as the snake, plague, or guest invades the bodies it encounters. Clare’s performative metaphor is itself porous, its indeterminate body comprising and recomprising itself in meeting the alien body of the disease, or the strange guest. What similarities does this metaphor awaken? Both the plague and the guest are taken into the home or the body, and figure the permeability of the host as home. Both disease and hospitality bring strangers together; the plague’s contagion creates unexpected communities of physical proximity, while the guest dwells in a home, not at home.

Whether the birds are pictured as guests or as hosts, Clare’s repeated guest/nest rhyme critiques decorum and its expectations.<sup>26</sup> For rhyme itself is a form of decorum, a “correspondence of sounds” doubling in sense as a correspondence *between* sounds, an address and a reply, a sound inviting the expectation of closure. In Clare’s bird poems, the returning sound meets the guest with the nest, bringing the guest inside the aural structure created by sound patterning. In this way sound can be a form of hospitality — a greeting, a meeting. It is also contagion, spreading into the nest in the form of sound repeating, so that the ear can no longer be certain where the guest ends and the nest begins; the ear perceives a familial relationship between rhyming sounds. The guest ruins the nest, and in this way the sound’s repetition joins violence and inevitability with the aesthetic pleasure of rhyme.

Clare’s problematization of decorous interaction between humans and animals anticipates what Derrida would later develop in his article, “Hostipitality.” Derrida folds the word “hostility” into that of “hospitality” to emphasize the fact that “Already hospitality is opposed to what is nothing other than opposition itself, namely, hostility”

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knowledge of society that makes the bird poems — if only by default — socially engaged” (180), I posit a reading of these poems that emphasizes their careful critique of human society.

<sup>26</sup> In this way, Clare fundamentally questions human codes of propriety until they cannot be recovered or ethically corrected. Clare’s poetics thus put human presence at risk in a way that is more challenging and frightening than Lawrence Buell’s formulation of an “environmental codes of manners” (*The Environmental Imagination* 109), which ultimately absolves certain prescient artists from their complicity in human problems.

("Hostipitality" 4). According to Derrida, "perhaps no one welcomed is ever completely welcome" (6) because to enter into a strange home is to enter a place with unrecognizable laws to which one must conform:

[H]ospitality is certainly, necessarily, a right, a duty, an obligation, the greeting of the foreign other as a friend but on the condition that the host . . . the one who receives, lodges, or gives asylum remains the patron, the master of the household, on the condition that he maintains his own authority in his own home, that he looks after himself and sees to and considers all that concerns him and thereby affirms the law of hospitality as the law of the household, the law of a place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.), the law of identity which de-limits the very place of proffered hospitality and maintains authority over it, maintains the truth of authority, remains the place of this maintaining, which is to say, of truth, thus limiting the gift proffered and making of this limitation, namely, the being-oneself in one's own home, the condition of the gift and of hospitality. (4)

The guest cannot be allowed to exist according to their previous codes of decorum, because the new home functions according to new and mandatory rules. On the other hand, however, the guest presents a risk to the home:

[T]o be hospitable is to let oneself be overtaken, to be ready to not be ready . . . to be surprised, in a fashion almost violent, violated and raped, stolen . . . precisely where one is not ready to receive—and not only not yet ready but not ready, unprepared in a mode that is not even that of the "not yet." (*Acts of Religion* 361)

For Derrida, no world exists in which the guest and host respect one another's strangeness. The fact that the word for "guest" and "host" is the same in French—*hôte*—performs the entwining and collapsing of subjectivities within these two roles. Through his rhyming of guest and nest and his depiction of the violence inherent in welcome, Clare makes the problem of decorum synecdochally stand for the fraught relationship between humans and animals.

The challenge that Clare presents to decorum is that what seems light and polite holds the possibility of violence. He insists that the reader imagine an interaction between animals and humans according to the rules of accommodation that humans have constructed for their own polite society. The fact that birds are an absurd interlocutor in polite conversation forces the question of how, then, we can treat animals with civility. For when faced with a nest, the guest's civility breaks down. Clare invites irreconcilable terms into the parlour of his metaphor. What does it mean for birds to occupy a guest or host position when they are birds, not humans? Even if the

metaphor of hospitality in “The Yellowhammers Nest” did not introduce explicit danger in the form of the snake, the fact of metaphor itself invades the nest by introducing the birds into a societal role both alien and nonsensical to them. Birds have no debt to human hospitality. In this way the guest metaphor itself makes the birds guests or strangers in the accommodation that is the poem. They constitute a case of the *differend*, which Jean-Francois Lyotard defines as “A case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments” (xi), or the chasm that stands between ways of being or thinking that are utterly alien to one another. Lyotard describes why the animal is a particularly apt figure for this case:

Some feel more grief over damages inflicted upon an animal than over those inflicted upon a human. This is because the animal is deprived of the possibility of bearing witness according to the human rules for establishing damages, and as a consequence, every damage is like a wrong and turns it into a victim *ipso facto*—but, if it does not at all have the means to bear witness, then there are not even damages, or at least you cannot establish them.—What you are saying defines exactly what I mean by a wrong: you are placing the defended or the animal before a dilemma. That is why the animal is a paradigm of the victim. (28)

Clare’s metaphor stages a version of the *differend* because the human’s notions of hospitality become violent when in the context of an animal’s home. The fact of difference between humans and non-humans necessitates that a discussion of engagement between them also be a discussion of language. For humans and non-humans have no language with which to be understood to the other.

What might it mean for humans and non-humans to listen to each other? What might it mean for humans and non-humans to be physically proximate to one another? What might hospitality between humans and non-humans look like? When the question becomes in this way about language, we see how these are all versions of the same question. The metaphor of the guest exists equally on all three of these planes, as an expectation of sociality, a definition of physical nearness, and a system of particular structures and conventions. Thus the question becomes: what are the terms of engagement when there are no common terms? The impossibility of listening without misunderstanding makes clear the ways in which problems of physical proximity between humans and non-humans and problems of hospitality between humans and non-humans meet in language. Clare’s poems in this way becomes special sites of inquiry into the limits of interspecies encounter.

Clare’s human narrators cultivate an ambivalent approach to language, as if from their position of human insensitivity they are groping and grasping for more sensitive



speech. Moored in the human conventions of hospitality that will so trouble the birds in guest/nest metaphors later in the poems, the narrators frequently introduce these poems with an invitation. Both “The Yellowhammers Nest” and “The Nightingales Nest” begin with a turn to the reader that initiates movement towards the bird’s home—but this movement is fraught with so many pauses, considerations, and warnings that even while it proposes going forward, the invitation seems to wonder whether progress is possible at all. This halting proposition is most pronounced at the beginning of “The Nightingales Nest”:

Up this green woodland ride lets softly rove  
 & list the nightingale—she dwelleth here  
 Hush let the wood gate softly clap—for fear  
 The noise might drive her from her home of love  
 For here Ive heard her many a merry year  
 At morn & eve nay all the live long day  
 As though she lived on song—this very spot  
 Just where that old mans beard all wildly trails  
 Rude arbours oer the rode & stops the way. (1-9)

The speaker’s invitation self-contradicts in a split between decorum and impropriety, for even while it politely solicits the reader into social engagement—“lets softly rove”—at the same time, it presumes to invite the reader to a place that is not the speaker’s home. He invites us instead into the bird’s home, which immediately problematizes an invitation which on the surface seems decorous. Importantly, the speaker invites the reader to listen: “lets softly rove/ & list the nightingale.” The poem becomes a pursuit of attention, an investigation of what it might mean to attend to a creature whose song is strange, unfamiliar. Even while this poem invites the nightingale’s song and elaborately prepares to hear, it also enfolds listening with the potential for violence.

This ambivalence is characteristic throughout the rest of the passage as well. Although the speaker urges movement, he repetitively modifies his verbs with the injunction to proceed “softly” (“softly rove,” [1], “softly clap” [3]), which implies—even while it wishes away—the possibility of rough or loud movement. Indeed, a submerged violence pulses beneath the language of this passage. “To rove” most immediately means to wander or move, but also means “to plunder,” “to practice piracy,” “to shoot (an arrow, bolt, etc.) at an arbitrarily selected mark,” or “to troll using live bait” (*OED*). What would it mean to plunder softly? This oxymoron is a significant figure for Clare’s conception of human capacity in general, which holds potential for harmlessly moving the roving limbs, poetically exerting the roving imagination, and also violently plundering the land in roving piracy. This simultaneity of possible meaning raises the uncontrollability of language—and in what might just be a neat coincidence, “to rove”

is also a regional English and Scottish expression for “To speak irrationally or incoherently; to show signs of madness or delirium; to rave” (*OED*). Later verbs in the poem turn too on a double edge of meaning: “There I have *hunted* like a very boy,” remembers the speaker, “*Creeping* on hands & knees” (12-13 emphasis added). These verbs of movement convey a careful quiet and the threat of violent intent.<sup>27</sup> The dormant violence of language sparkles at the corner of the jumpy speaker’s imagination, as he urges, “Hush let the wood gate softly clap—for fear / The noise might drive her from her home of love” (3-4). Sound is the desire of these lines and their terror, as the speaker aches to “list” the nightingale’s song, while he starts and shushes at the clapping gate or over-loud footsteps. In this way, listening itself becomes a form of sounding out. Whereas noise conventionally represents violence, for Clare, listening too holds a potential for harm. In this way, Clare draws listening and speaking together in a speaking ear that becomes a noisy site for sound’s—and listening’s—twinned disturbances.

The movement of this passage, like its desire for and repulsion from sound, jolts forwards and jerks back in this alternating, equivocal invitation. In the first line, the speaker initiates forward movement: “Up this green woodland ride” (1), before stopping short in the next line: “she dwelleth *here* / Hush” (2-3, emphasis added). The reader stands in one place: “*here* I’ve heard her” (6, emphasis added), “*this* very spot” (7, emphasis added), then points forward and away again, “Just where *that* old mans beard all wildly trails” (8, emphasis added). Although the invitation of this poem does ultimately result in forward movement—roving, creeping, and hunting—it proceeds with so many pauses that its faltering quality cannot be overlooked. Clare’s speaker seems at once excited and troubled by human progression, dwelling on its risks (its excessive noise or speed that threatens to frighten the nightingale) as well as its rewards (the sound of song). So although this still qualifies as an invitation—and therefore as part of the decorous language that excludes the birds even while it invades their nests—it is a halting invitation, one that attempts to attend to stasis even as it turns to movement.

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<sup>27</sup> In this reading I differ from Gary Harrison, for whom the creepiness of the creeping is elided into a bland good-naturedness: “the poet has *earned* familiarity with the nightingale’s nest by ‘Creeping on hands and knees through matted thorns’” (45, emphasis added). I think we need to resist assumptions about what kinds of trespass are “earned,” especially when that earning is only located within the subject’s attitude toward the trespass. It is easy to see how this formulation makes the subject the judge, jury and executioner in a question of consent that overlooks the bird’s perspective—which Clare is careful to record as one of terror. In the way that he tends to equate Clare himself with the speaker of the poems, Harrison understates Clare’s capacity for nuance and irony: “Respect for the nightingale’s home comes from the injunction to close the gate quietly to avoid disturbing the home, another indication of Clare’s conscious gesture to acknowledge the simple dignity of the nightingale’s existence” (44-45). This reading does not ring true in a poem so carefully devoted to marking the problems with human observation—no matter how well-intentioned that observation may be.

Indeed the ultimate admission of the poem is an explicit if somewhat reluctant statement on the problem of human presence itself. The nearer the speaker and the invited reader get to the nightingale's nest, the greater the bird's apprehension becomes until she cries out in "a plaintive note of danger nigh" (58) and finally "sudden stops—as choking fear / That might betray her home" (60-61). Rather than resulting in the desire for presence and company, this tentative invitation culminates in departure. The speaker hears the nightingale fall silent in fear, and he turns away: "so even now / We'll leave it as we found it" (61-62). The same stumbling qualities that characterize the speaker's initial invitation follow him here. He says, "Our presence doth retard / Her joys & doubt turns every rapture chill" (65-66). The verb "retard" is conspicuous in the passage because it describes what is in fact the utter blocking or prevention of pleasure as, instead, a delay. The faltering progression of the first lines returns in the way the speaker imagines the bird's perception of him: he holds onto the possibility of mutual joy in their company, but sees that joy far off, delayed by doubts and considerations.

Clare's strange form of ambivalent invitation fills human attention with uncertainty in a way that, although it ultimately falls into human movement, first hangs suspended in the possibility of stasis. This gesture of proposing progression fraught with pause reworks in fascinating ways the rhetoric of apostrophe. As Jonathan Culler notes, apostrophe engages with the inanimate world in a way that passionately imagines, and through this imagination evokes and creates, sentience and response. He links this life-giving vocative with performative language—"What is really in question, however, is the power of poetry to make something happen" (62)—for the way that it calls into being the response that it demands. Rather than "turning away" to inanimate forces in the poem, the speaker turns towards the reader. But this turn to the reader stands in the place of more conventional apostrophes in Clare's other bird poems. For example, in "The Robins Nest," the speaker begins with a strikingly similar invitation addressed not to the reader but to spring: "Come luscious spring come with thy mossy roots / Thy weed strown banks" (1-2). Like the suggestion that the reader enter a home not his, this invitation is rather presumptuous, since of course the spring will come whether or not it is invoked by the poet's authority.

But whereas this apostrophe to the spring is unambiguously affirmative, calling on the transformative season to fill the world with renewal, Clare's modified apostrophe to the reader in "The Nightingales Nest" seems to belong to an anti-form. If true apostrophe addresses an inanimate being in a way that calls it forth into life, this anti-apostrophe addresses an animate being in a way that immobilizes and mutes, asking the addressed to pause in the realm of things. Culler argues that apostrophe is inherently embarrassing because "It is the pure embodiment of poetic pretention: of the subject's claim that in his verse he is not merely an empirical poet, a writer of verse, but the embodiment of poetic tradition and of the spirit of poesy" (63). In contrast Clare's anti-apostrophe is embarrassing because it willfully flouts and problematizes the value

of human voice and human presence. Culler's apostrophe is "perhaps always in indirect invocation of the muse" (63), but Clare's apostrophe is here in indirect problematization of the muse. For of course the nightingale is a figure for poetic inspiration in the Romantic tradition. Coleridge's conversational nightingales

answer and provoke each other's song,  
 With skirmish and capricious passagings,  
 And murmurs musical and swift jug jug,  
 And one low piping sound more sweet than all—  
 Stirring the air with such a harmony. (58-62)

Similarly, Keats's "immortal Bird" ("Ode to a Nightingale" 61) sings the same charmed notes across generations, and across centuries has "Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" (69-70).<sup>28</sup> Clare's nightingale also delights the ear with its splendid song, but it leads the listening speaker to understand his own presence as a violence—and it chokes on fear when he comes too close. By addressing his readers in the halting terms of an anti-apostrophe, Clare asks them to join him in a pause that questions whether human agency can or ever should be asserted.

## 2. "Of stranger witching notes . . . / 'Wew-wew wew-wew, chur-chur chur-chur'"

In the last section, we saw how through invitation, Clare's speakers consider the stakes of attention and receptivity. A version of the speaking ear that foregrounds the problem of human civility in the context of human/animal relationships, Clare's invitation puts human presence and progress into question without ultimately rejecting those things altogether. In the section that follows, I will turn to a contrasting form of the speaking ear: Clare's imitations of bird sounds. When Clare repeats in poetry animal sounds that cannot be understood, the speaker's mouth becomes secondary to the ear; the mouth is made to give over itself to another sound, to repetition without meaning. In this way, Clare performs a verbal listening.

When birds speak, sing, or cry, their sounds stop humans in their tracks.<sup>29</sup> In "The Nuthatch," the birds' speech halts the action around it:

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<sup>28</sup> Clare positioned himself in opposition to Keats in his representation of nature: "when he speaks of woods Dryads & Fawns are sure to follow & the brook looks alone without her naiads yet the frequency of such classical accompaniment makes it wearisome to the reader where behind every rose bush he looks for a Venus & under every laurel a thrumming Appollo" (quoted in Chirico 137).

<sup>29</sup> To read Clare's bird poems as an unresolved and unresolvable critique of human presence is a departure from most critical narratives, even those that emphasize ecological concerns. Gary Harrison begins by problematizing the humanistic "notion that poetry recalibrates our perception of the world,"

In summer showers a skreeking noise is heard,  
 Deep in the woods, of some uncommon bird;  
 It makes a loud and long-continued noise  
 And often stops the speed of men and boys. (1-4)

The men and boys were formerly engaged in a kind of movement that Clare describes only as “speed.” In one word, Clare impoverishes this kind of living by succinctly replicating the way in which a fast-paced life effaces details and immediacy, leaving behind only the memory of speed itself. But the men and boys “stop[]” when they hear the bird. In the presence of birdnoise, Clare empties language in two directions—first, towards blankness, and second, towards teeming nonsense. When describing the birdsong, the speaker on the one hand becomes thick-tongued and repetitive, falling again and again on the term “noise.” He says that a “noise is heard” (1), “a loud and long-continued noise” (3), “the noise from day to day” (9), and attempts to locate the “bird that made the noise” (14). In the constrained space of a sonnet, to repeat a noun as many as four times is a striking gesture—especially a noun that describes not the specificity of the sound itself, but rather the unreadability of the sound, its discordancy, its disturbance. The effect of this repetition is a gluing up of language, a sticking on one word in a way that slows down sound as though in an attempt to stop the poem itself in the same way that the men and boys are stopped.

On the other hand, the bird noise also activates language’s potential to fall open in spitting and spiraling sounds without sense. The onomatopoeic verbal adjective “skreeking” (1) describes bird sound not in the way it means but rather in the way it sounds, a risky form of meaning-making that emphasizes the sensuality of language over its sense and thus threatens to derange all other words from reason. For there is a risk of contagion in the term “skreeking.” Sitting as it does so close to the conventionally poetic phrase, “summer showers,” “skreeking” pulls out the “s” sounds in that phrase, begging the question of how far “summer showers” itself performs the soft misting “s” splashes of summer rain. When describing bird noise, Clare consistently breaks language out of conventionality in an attempt to bend and contort it into an approximation of inhuman speech. In “The Landrail,” the birdsong is described

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but settles on attitude only subtly different, one that asserts that “poetry as an act of engaging the world invites its reader to participate in the emotional and intellectual complex of an exemplary attunement to nature” (41). The notion that human occupation can somehow be made right if only the perceiving subject adjusts his gaze to some correct level of sensitivity is one that Clare pushes against in these poems. Jonathan Bate goes so far as to assert, “[T]he tree needs us every bit as much as we need the tree” (173). In the context of this quotation, Bate is pointing out that we need the tree to situate and ground us in the physical world, while the tree needs us to represent it in the ideal realms of poetry and philosophy. Clare’s poems raise the question of whether the trees need us at all.

as a “craiking sound” (29), and in a surreal and experimental passage in “The Progress of Rhyme,” Clare devotes lines to mimicking the nightingale:

—‘Chew-chew chew-chew’ — and higher still:  
 ‘Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer’ — more loud and shrill  
 ‘Cheer-up cheer-up cheer-up’ — and dropt  
 Low: ‘tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug,’ and stopt  
 One moment just to drink the sound  
 Her music made, and then a round  
 Of stranger witching notes was heard:  
 ‘Wew-wew wew-wew, chur-chur chur-chur,  
 Woo-it woo-it’ — could this be her?  
 ‘Tee-rew Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew,  
 Chew-rit chew-rit’ — and ever new,  
 ‘Will-will will-will, grig-grig grig-grig.’  
 The boy stopt sudden on the brig  
 To hear the ‘tweet tweet tweet’ so shrill,  
 The ‘jug jug jug’ — and all was still. (239-254)

In the first part of this passage, Clare makes birdsong and human song share the space of the line so that he can maintain the end rhymes. The performative “Chew-chew chew-chew” gives way to descriptive glosses like “and higher still.” These returns to human language ease the discomfort and embarrassment of the beginning of the lines (for if apostrophe was embarrassing, then how much more so is a sustained transcription of animal sounds?), and they remind the reader that this performance is all in the service of documentation. If the first half of the line goes (literally) wild in wild animal mimicry, the last half performs an insistence on rational precision, pinning down strictly how the sound sounded. By performing sounds that remain incomprehensible, the speaker becomes an ear, representing not just that over which the speaker has control, but also that which exceeds understanding.

But the return to human words at the end of the lines could also demonstrate how closely related these two forms of song, human and bird, are. The variegated but unified chimes of the nightingale bring out the musicality of rhyme itself. When the impressions of birdsong begin to unfurl across the entire line, Clare rhymes nonsense with sense in a way that puts ordinary words at risk of being emptied of their capacity for clear signification. In the couplet, “‘Will-will will-will, grig-grig grig-grig.’ / The boy stopt sudden on the brig,” the word “brig” sounds suddenly suspect because of the near relationship it bears to the bird sound, “grig.” Clare bares the fact that there is no inherent difference between the sounds “grig” and “brig,” even though we invest one with meaning and not the other. For rhyme is another form of irrational patterning. It

links through sound words which otherwise would have no relationship to one another, and in this way throws across human language a patterned net of nonsense that pulls into clusters like sounding words. Rhyme reveals that there is a pattern underneath the poem, except that the pattern adheres not to any system guided by reason, but rather to a set of meaningless relationships. In this reading, the glosses at the end of the lines could be less an attempt at rational documentation than at musical scoring. Giving in to the pure sound of words, they could be poetry's version of musical instructions to the performer like *forte* or *fortissimo*.

And the problem of performance is one that this passage insists that we consider. How is a human supposed to read these lines aloud? On the one hand, they loosely conform to iambic rhythm in a way that might allow a reader to string the regular rhythms of the rest of the poem through these unmeaning words. Especially because they are aided by the familiarity of the aabbcc rhyme pattern, the lines "'Chew-chew chew-chew' — and higher still: / 'Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer' — more loud and shrill" (239-240) could be read in an iambic tetrameter lope. But on the other hand, some lines break even out of the underlying tetrameter rhythm. "Low: 'tweet tweet tweet jug jug jug,' and stopt" seems impossible to squeeze into four main beats without some imaginative trilling. If one line should be trilled, should they all? Certainly, the flat-throated English way of saying these letters sounds nothing like a nightingale, which suggests that at the very least these lines should be delivered in a sing-song, or maybe even a whistle. No matter how the lines are read, however, they deform the rest of the seemingly straightforward poem, drawing out the inherent nonsense in human language, and deflating the mistaken egotism that would call human language reasonable over the language of other creatures. Lines later, Clare's speaker gasps out in amazement at the magic that these noises wreak on language: "Words were not left to hum the spell" (257), he says as pure music takes over the bodies of words and makes them dance. If "[w]ords were not left," then there were no words remaining in the lexicon that could do justice to the humming spell; but also the line could mean that words were not trusted or allowed to approximate the song of the birds, and so the speaker must turn to nonsense. For it is in nonsense's twirl of sounds that language really dances.

Clare's impressions of bird speech are what align him most closely with twenty-first century experimental poetry, for they attempt to free language from human will toward intention and definable meaning. Again and again, Clare suggests that poetry is the space where lucid human signification need not hold sway, and he associates this realm with that of the birds. In "The Yellowhammers Nest," when he finally finds the bird's nest, he sees:

—Five eggs pen-scribbled over lilac shells  
 Resembling writing scrawls which fancy reads  
 As natures poesy & pastoral spells

They are the yellowhammers & she dwells  
A poet-like. (13-17)<sup>30</sup>

He compares the yellowhammer to a poet and her eggs to her poems, but importantly these are not poems that have a determinate relationship with reality. Rather, the eggs are “pen-scribbled,” an image that suggests loopy loops and blotches of ink, “which fancy reads” according to designs that change with changing moods. Clare makes the same link in “The Landrail” between the bird’s creativity and the poet’s. When the mowers stumble on the home of the landrail, they “wonder what the bird can be / That lays without a nest” (51-52). In this context, “lay” has two meanings: to lay eggs, or to sing a lay. Although the first meaning might seem most appropriate to the context of discovering the bird’s home, it is in fact the song of the landrail that fascinates the listeners throughout the rest of the poem. If to lay is another way to say sing, what does it mean to lay without a nest? Clare draws a connection between the risk that the bird takes in laying outside of any conventional space of protection or shelter, and the risk that he takes in writing poetry that breaks out of convention, whether into fresh ways of seeing the world, or into nonsense itself. The landrails “drop their eggs of curious make / Deep blotched & nearly round / A mystery still to men & boys” (55-57), and this image of a creation of “curious make,” “nearly round” but not regular, and “blotched” into mysterious patterns and signs, is an image not only of the eggs, but also of the poem.<sup>31</sup>

### 3. “But when the landrails noise is heard/ They wonder at the sounds”

Poetry is a space where language can bear more than what we see and hear, and where sound is charged with irreducible mystery. In *Noise that Stays Noise*, Cole Swensen uses information theory to define the concept of noise as something that does not necessarily need to be clarified into meaning, but rather as that which enriches literary texts. She writes, “Literary noise must be defined differently, though, because it is often not a degradation of the message; on the contrary, such noise is often intentional and aimed at preventing the suppression of imagination that complete

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<sup>30</sup> For an insightful reading of this poem that does not attempt to resolve the mystery of the eggs or to absolve human presence in the bird’s nest, see John Goodridge’s chapter on the bird nest poems in his *John Clare and Community* (particularly 136-141).

<sup>31</sup> Although Clare does align the song of the poem with the song of the bird, I want to be careful not to move into a too-quick identification between these forms of speech that remain ultimately foreign to one another. Whereas Jonathan Bate affirms, “For Clare [...] to be drawn to a nest, to stoop towards it but still to let it live, is to be gathered into the fabric of the earth and in being so gathered to secure the identity of the self” (161), I emphasize in contrast the degree to which Clare makes the “identity of the self” not only *insecure* but also impossible. Indeed, to identify human song with bird song is to give poetry up to what is irreducibly incomprehensible.



certainty can cause" (7). In this view of poetry, meaning does not have to be the paraphrasable element, but can rather inhere in what Swensen calls "the unquantifiable qualities of sound relationships, word associations, and innate rhythms—but also things that intentionally disrupt the smooth flow of information, such as fragmentation, unusual syntax, ambiguity, neologism, juxtaposition, alternative logics, graphic spacing" (7-8). Although Swensen looks for her examples to contemporary poetry, her positioning of noise at the heart of poetic meaning rings equally true for Clare's bird poems.

Birdsong introduces what is utterly unfamiliar, not in a way that assimilates or comprehends it, but rather in a way that stops the workings of comprehension for a moment that cannot be made useful, or even ultimately edifying. In this concluding section, I suggest that both of Clare's contrasting versions of the speaking ear—invitation and birdnoise—bring him to a resistance of comprehension, a pause before rational progression that might forever remain suspended. The affect that pervades the speaker's encounters with birdsong is that of wonder. In "The Landrail," the bird's noise makes the listeners "wonder why" (30) in a way that is detached from any specific question, and rather seems to be a confusion about "why" in general. The question shuttles between a confusion over what is singing and where it is doing so. "Boys," says the poet,

know the note of many a bird  
 In their birdnesting rounds  
 But when the landrails noise is heard  
 They wonder at the sounds. (21-24)

The wonder in this context seems at first to pertain to whose voice they are hearing, since the boys "know the note of many a bird," yet "wonder at the sounds" of the landrail. But the speaker has no question about what bird it is; he uses the name landrail both in the title and in this stanza itself, and he seems equally fixated on the amazing amazement that the landrail engenders. This wonder is deeper than just a desire to identify the bird. Again, when the questions circle around the location of the landrail, they at the same time seem to speak to a greater sense of unknowing. The boys "look in every tuft of grass" (25) and "peep in every bush they pass" (22) and still are "none the wiser yet" (28). Indeed, this admission of the absence of wisdom could be a colloquial reference to the fact that they cannot see the landrail; however, the poem also supports the possibility that the landrail's song awakens an indeterminate disorientation. The sound is:

like a fancy everywhere  
 A sort of living doubt

We know tis somthing but it ne'er  
Will blab the secret out. (13-16)

The image of a “living doubt” evokes a doubt endowed with the breathing, moving and changing qualities of life, one that refuses to settle into dormancy or stasis, one that continually surprises and rather than abating with time, grows and strengthens. Even the descriptive language of this passage seems touched by the tentative fingers of uncertainty. The speaker grasps for comparisons by which he can translate the sound of the song, which he describes as “like a fancy,” “a sort of living doubt.” This suggests that the song evades definite description and instead can only be spoken of through a figure that insists on the “not quite” quality of the described. He avoids precise terms of navigation and naming, and instead chooses general ones: “everywhere” is the fancy; “something” is the song.<sup>32</sup> Even in the final stanza of this poem, wonder never resolves into knowledge. The speaker describes the song as “A mystery still to men & boys” (57), who “guess it but a summer noise” (59). Bearing the somber and almost mystical title of “mystery,” the song remains in general and uncertain terms, associated broadly with “summer” as a whole but not leading to greater precision.

In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost defines wonder in Platonic, Aristotelian, and Baconian terms, as well as in the contemporary terms of object-oriented ontology. Plato’s conception of wonder refers either to awe or astonishment of a religious kind, or to logical confusion. Bogost argues that although most philosophers have understood Plato and Socrates’s wonder as more closely aligned to the second form, the form of the dialogue in which it is discussed in *Theaetetus* allows the option of favoring the first form. Because the dialogue ends indecisively with both conversants, Theaetetus and Theodorus, acknowledging that they should be humble about what they do not know, Bogost argues that wonder requires “pause for its own sake” (121). Francis Bacon similarly lays out two possibilities for wonder, which he calls both “the seed of knowledge” and “broken knowledge” (Bogost 122). The second form is what attracts Bogost, and what constitutes, according to Joseph-Marie de Maistre, “a science attached to nothing,” or “a knowledge without knowledge” (122). Bacon compares wonder to the suspension of ability:

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<sup>32</sup> James McKusick describes how Clare rejected the Linnaean scheme of identification in favor of a more “natural” naming through vernacular and dialect terms (81). McKusick points out that although some have believed Clare’s choice to have been motivated by his ignorance of the Linnaean system, in fact naturalists in the 1820s and 1830s were collectively turning away from the more formal system towards another developed by John Ray, and so Clare’s vocabulary may in fact have been a politically-inflected choice (n. 8 p. 237). I would like to align Clare’s use of obscured terminology in “The Landrail” with a similarly intentional rejection of conventional precision.

Wonder causeth astonishment, or an immovable posture of the body; casting up of the eyes to heaven, and lifting up of the hands. For astonishment, it is caused by the fixing of the mind upon one object of cognition, whereby it doth not spaiate and transcur, as it useth; for in wonder the spirits fly not, as in fear; but only settle, and are made less apt to move. As for the casting up of the eyes, and the lifting up of the hands, it is a kind of appeal to the Deity, which is the author, by power and providence, of strange wonders. (Quoted in Bogost 123)

Openness to the agency of the object and the object's capacity to dwell in a cloud of mystery requires a degree of wonder, as Bogost's emphasis on objected-oriented ontology suggests. As Bogost puts it, "To wonder is to suspend all trust in one's own logics, be they religion, science, philosophy, custom, or opinion, and to become subsumed entirely in the uniqueness of an object's native logics—flour granule, firearm, civil justice system, longship, fondant" (124). In this way, wonder does not desire to break through the unknowing that shrouds knowledge, but rather puts the pursuit of knowledge itself into question. Rather than mining wonder as a utility towards human concerns and desires, wonder in Bogost's terms, "respect[s] things as things in themselves" (131) and "hopes to darken, to isolate, to insulate" (131) in a world made up of millions of worlds, each alien to one another.

Clare's bird poems develop a form of wonder that darkens and isolates in Bogost's terms, but also one that spreads from perceiving to perceived and back again, creating a paradoxical community of alienness that confuses distinctions between subject and object. In one of Clare's most subtle and fascinating bird poems, "The Squirrel's Nest," what begins as a bird's nest introduces a spreading strangeness to its environment and all that stand within it, until in the poem's final lines we see that the nest is not a bird's at all. While walking in the woods, the speaker:

saw a strange-formed nest on stoven tree  
 Where startled pigeone buzzed from bouncing hawk.  
 I wondered strangely what the nest could be  
 And thought besure it was some foreign bird. (3-6)

At first, as we might expect, the speaker identifies a nest that looks unusual, one that is "strange-formed"; here in conventional terms the object causes the agent to feel wonder because the object is strange to the perceiver. But as the speaker stands looking, the strangeness within the nest turns back and enters him: "I *wondered strangely* what the nest could be," he says, the incongruity suddenly self-applied and conditioning his own state of wondering. The nest seems to create an atmosphere of mystery that envelops and affects those in its domain. Again, in the next line, the speaker determines that the nest must belong to a "foreign bird," the strangeness circling back to encompass the

nest; and again, as the speaker stands absorbed in observing, he says "'Twas oval shaped; strange wonder filled my breast" (9). This image of not only wonder, but *strange* wonder filling the speaker—wonder so wondrous that it is estranged and alien from itself—suggests the somehow contagious capacity of the affect. No longer is it clear that the speaker is the agent in this poem. He has become foreign to himself, "filled" (9) with alien sensations and states of questioning, unsure of what he sees, and without mastery over his environment.<sup>33</sup> If conversation begins in the action of "turning around together," this movement of reciprocal turning is replicated here in the circling and returning of wonder. But where conversation presumes to create understanding between two speakers, wonder takes understanding away. In the same way as the nonsensical birdsounds halted human speed, the strange nest recreates the action of conversation without conversation's comfort, making the interlocutors feel confusion in place of security, and strange instead of at home.

The final lines of "The Squirrel's Nest" revise and critique the conventions of epiphanic experience while at the same time performing the entrance of strangeness into language itself. The speaker realizes that he has been wrong in assuming that the nest belongs to a bird when his confused attention results in a version of epiphany:

I hoped to catch the old one on her nest  
 When something bolted out—I turned to see—  
 And a brown squirrel pattered up the tree.  
 'Twas lined with moss and leaves, compact and strong;  
 I slithered down and wondering went along. (10-14)

Although on the surface, these lines seem to clarify the speaker's wonder and solve the mystery of the nest, in fact the wonder remains. The moment of witnessing is relayed in disjointed, jerking phrases that imitate rapid turns of the head to see and see again: "something bolted out—I turned to see—." Although the following line describes a "brown squirrel" running up the tree, the speaker does not actually guarantee that the squirrel is the "something" he saw or heard bolting. Indeed, language seems disconnected from forward movement and clear reference in this passage, as the following line contains a misplaced modifier. The description "'Twas lined with moss and leaves" presumably refers to the inside of the nest, but technically applies to the squirrel that just ran away. It is as though these jerking phrases, muddy realizations, and misplaced modifiers signal the spreading of strangeness into language so that what

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the homelessness of home in Clare's poetry, from a more biographical consideration of the effect of enclosure on his thinking, see Alan Bewell. For a critique, in another context, of assumptions around what it means to be a "local" poet, see Kevis Goodman, "Conjectures on Beachy Head: Charlotte Smith's Geological Poetics and the Grounds of the Present."

seems to be the final moment of epiphany actually suggests the impossibility of certainty. Indeed, the final line of the poem presents the speaker walking away and shaking his head, his confusion unabated: "I sluthered down and *wondering* went along." As in Bogost's account, wonder leads not to the garnering of human knowledge, but rather to an awe-filled respect for things in themselves.

Yet Clare's wonder has another version, one that illuminates uncertainty with violent light and performs, parallel to Bacon's alternate metaphor of "the seed of knowledge," human blundering from awe's twilight into a forced form of knowledge. More often than not, Clare's bird poems end in disturbing and small-scale violence to the birds—small-scale because it is mere amusement to the human protagonists, and disturbing because it usually involves a forced entry into a nest or sanctuary. In "Wild Duck's Nest," a group of schoolboys play in a stream where they discover a nest—and feel wonder spreading inside them in similar terms as in "The Squirrel's Nest." They see "a small hole in a hollow tree ; / When one looked in, and wonder filled his breast" (4-5). Here too, wonder is a growing, capacious recognition of the capaciousness of the world around, an affect that "fill[s]" the perceiver in a way that puts his position as detached and disinterested observer into question. But rather than ending in a preservation of wonder, this poem moves briskly, in the rhyming time of a closing couplet, to identifying precisely what stands before the schoolchildren. Immediately, a boy "halloed out, 'A wild duck on her nest'" (6). His "halloo" suggests an aggressive, loud, and forceful naming, one that identifies and affirms the bird's category, even while it communicates that label to the other boys. The fact that Clare rhymes the label, "A wild duck on her nest," with "wonder filled his breast" performs the neatness with which human determination answers, satisfies and quenches wonder. The couplet closes, and with it the glimmerings of question.

In the lines that follow, Clare portrays human violence and incomprehension in schoolboy miniature. The boys rally in mock bravery: "They doubted, and the boldest went before" (7). Their boldness frightens away the duck and leaves abandoned, in brilliantly uncertain reference, wonder: "And the duck bolted when they waded o'er / And suthered up and flew against the wind / And left the boys and wondering thoughts behind" (8-10). Whose "wondering thoughts" are fled? Although the poem until now has described the boys' perspective and the boys' curiosity, the syntax of this construction suggests that the duck herself has been wondering at the boys from within her nest. Given wonder's conversational capacity to "turn around together," circling from agent to object until these distinctions become meaningless, this portrayal of the bird wondering is continuous with Clare's other bird poems. The conclusion of the sonnet describes the final invasion and plundering of the nest:

The eggs lay hid in down and lightly prest,  
They counted more than thirty in the nest.

They filled their hats with eggs and waded o'er  
 And left the nest as quiet as before. (11-14)

Consistent with the first boy's loud logic in his naming of the bird, this passage shows a drive towards reason in the way the children catalogue and count the eggs. Clare's final couplet clinches with aching accuracy the degree to which the boys have misrecognized the nest in their hurry to understand it. When they fill their hats with the eggs and wade away, they apparently leave "the nest as quiet as before" — though of course the nest could not now be more different. To the boys, the nest was as silent full of eggs as it is when the eggs have been taken away; but to the bird, the nest is now bereft, whether or not the human children understand what that means. If the boys saw just as much "quiet" before as after, then they did not recognize the life of the birds and equated presence with absence.

The same bafflement and misrecognition accompanies human drive towards knowledge in "The Nuthatch." In the first lines, as we have seen, the nuthatch makes a noise so alienating that it "stops the speed of men and boys" (4). But in the final lines, a schoolboy, filled with curiosity, searches out the "skreeking" bird:

And starts the jay-bird from the bushes green;  
 He looks, and sees a nest he's never seen,  
 And bears the spotted eggs with many joys,  
 And thinks he's found the bird that made the noise. (11-14)

Again, the robbing of the nest is a small violence made more unjust by the incomprehension that accompanies it. For the final couplet reads with mild insanity — the boy carries away the eggs, believing that he is in possession of "the bird that made the noise" (14). The error of his conviction is immediately obvious, since the eggs were clearly not making any sounds. But the boy's aggressive impetus towards uncovering the mystery of song forces itself into false knowledge, a knowledge that robs and invades the nuthatch's nest.

Clare indirectly critiques human reason by making clear its error through this type of dramatic irony, which the reader accesses at the expense of the human protagonist. Indeed, human certainty in the bird poems is closely related to random chance, a force that empties humans of their imagined ascendancy over the environment around them and makes them either the objects or the unconscious agents of accident. Through a subtle braiding of homonyms and submerged imagery, Clare binds together these small violences and invasions with the drive for knowledge and also with the laws of decorum — the rules that govern the behavior of the guest and host — that I examined at the beginning of this chapter. In the final few stanzas of "The

Landrail," the speaker describes the threat to the birds through a wreath of understated metaphors:

Yet accident will often meet  
 The nest within its way  
 & weeders when they weed the wheat  
 Discover where they lay. (45-48)

The weeders stumble into the landrail's nest and awaken language of decorum: "accident will often *meet*" the birds' home, as though accident personified destroys in a way somehow subtly related to the polite meeting and greeting of a guest. Human progress is also folded into these strands of associations through the noun "way," which evokes images of roads and rails, sturdy teleological progression that incites a little whirring propeller of forward movement which turns throughout the following line: "& weeders when they *weed* the *wheat*." The whispering, scythe-like sounds of the alliterative *whee* perform the steady movements of the workers, who methodically develop, cultivate, and reap the fields where the birds also live. In this way, agriculture is linked up with the progression of human knowledge, for when the weeders uncover the nest their action takes an elevated form through the lofty verb "discover." In this verb lives associations of scientific discovery and exploitation.

The next stanza returns us to the stanza that began my chapter, and here this involution of decorum, progress, and accidental violence continues:

& mowers on the meadow lea  
 Chance on their noisy guest  
 & wonder what the bird can be  
 That lays without a nest (49-52)

I would like to revisit the suggestive rhyme between "guest" and "nest" in this stanza in order to explore the role that chance and wonder play in decorum as it is imagined here. When the mowers uncover the nest, their unexpected entrance makes them hosts in a home not their own. The "chance" of this meeting suggests a randomness to human discovery even while it reinforces the effect of affect, the "wonder" that fills the mowers. Clare underscores the arbitrary nature of human certainty when he portrays the push from wonder's curiosity to knowledge's determination. Presumably referring to the landrail's song but still bearing an interesting degree of displacement in the logic of the sentence, the "men & boys" in the poem's final lines "*guess it* but a summer noise" (59). (Guess *what* but a summer noise? The "noise" evades precise naming, once again quietly questioning language by stepping behind the dappled shade of a pronoun whose reference is assumed but technically uncertain.) Although earlier in this chapter,

I emphasized the preservation of wonder in this passage, the poem also makes available the opposite reading. Unable to allow noise, or, in Cole Swensen's terms, to "stay noise," these protagonists file away the sound under the category of "summer," but the knowledge that they coax out of ignorance is importantly described as a "guess." Similar to the way the humans tromp into the nest, so they stomp into incomplete and arbitrary understanding.

In "The Groundlark," humans pass in calm ignorance through the grassy area where the nest lies, failing to see the eggs that are "dark as is the fallow ground" (10). In this poem, as in others that we have examined, child's play becomes the unthinking agent of destruction:

The schoolboy kicked the grass in play  
But danger never guessed;  
And when they came to mow the hay  
They found an empty nest. (11-14)

Whereas we have become used to hearing the sound "guest" rhymed with "nest," here the same sound provides new meaning in the homonym "guessed." The playful kicking awakens chance, which is aurally aligned with the entrance of the guest. It seems appropriate that Clare would multiply meanings within the guest/guessed sound, for this amplifies the noise-like quality of human language. Words attempt to signify, but when they are uttered amidst bird cries, the difference between noise and noise is questionable. To untangle the tightly tied associations within this passage presents difficulties. The "guest," heard here only as the ghostly shadow of another word, becomes a form of guessing, chance that intends no "danger," yet still introduces the destructive "kick[]" that empties the nest of its inhabitants. When the nest is "found" empty in the harvest season, the discovery is made passive and invested with the unintentionality of human knowledge. In this way, play plays with violence; discovery takes random form; and human decorum hovers never fully enunciated in this cluster of playing and breaking, kicking and finding, guessing and guesing.

This homonym between guest and guessed suggests that the vagaries of human knowing—its nearness to chance, its tendency towards violence, its elisions and its failures—are always already related to the problems of encounter. How can one adequately meet another being? How can listening span the alien needs and languages of different species? Clare's bird poems take up the speaking ear in order to enact what it might mean to speak outside legibility, to take interaction beyond decorum into a place past comprehension. In this way, they do not resolve the problem of human trespass, but rather they ask us to welcome a spreading strangeness that, if we let it, will unhinge rational knowledge and stick, pause, or stop forward progression.



Chapter Three  
**“The ear distinctly tells”: The Perversity, Occultism, and Slow Violence  
of the Speaking Ear in Poe’s “The Bells”**

**1. Sound’s Suggestions**

For Edgar Allan Poe, hearing is helpless. Not only does it foreground the permeability of a speaker whose first task is to listen, but also it compels him to compulsion: to repetitions, chiming rhymes, and onomatopoeia. “The Bells” stages this helplessness from the outset: “Hear the sledges with the bells” (*The Portable Poe* 430).<sup>34</sup> From the speaker’s first utterance, he speaks hearing. Poe’s imperative “hear” reinforces the automatic way in which sound enters the body without the body’s awareness or acquiescence.<sup>35</sup> One cannot choose but hear, both physically and grammatically. And the poem immediately complies with the opening command:

Hear the sledges with the bells—  
Silver bells!  
*What* a world of merriment their melody foretells!  
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night!  
While the stars, that oversprinkle  
All the Heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight (1-8)

The second line echoes back the name of the bells, “bells” rhyming with “bells,” in an exclamation that simply registers the presence of sound, and the speaker’s listening witness of it. The exclamation functions as a deictic, an aural pointing, or an expression of the meeting between ear and sound. Performing involution, the line also enacts a sonic chiasmus, with the opening sounds of “s” and “l” reversed at the end of the line, “l” and “s.” “[T]inkle” in the fourth line performs the bell’s jingling both through

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<sup>34</sup> All citations from Poe are from this volume and hereafter are cited by line number.

<sup>35</sup> Gemma Corradi-Fiumara discusses the irresistibility of the imperative: “When a thinker turns his attention to the humble, though exacting, labour of listening it is almost as though he were impeded or held back from this inappropriate operative level by some élitist power (possibly envious of its strength); it deviously insinuates to the thinker who tries to listen authentically that he could well be a member of a high and rational order, so to speak, capable of discerning essences and linguistic paradigms from the myriad of interactions; an élitist power which has become internalized seems to ask rhetorically why there should be any need to listen, when one has not only achieved a mastery of language but also of the metalanguages whereby one can soar to the level of the relations that exist between discourse and reality, or among different types of discourse” (58).

repetition and onomatopoeia. Poetic structure itself, in its tendency toward echo and repetition, supports the sonic ricochet of bells throughout the stanza, as “tinkle” repeats in “oversprinkle” and “twinkle,” hearing and hearing again the chime rhyme in words and fragments of words. Even the preponderance of *i* vowels funnels the silver sound subtly throughout these lines, and works in tandem with the sharp, delicate *t* repetitions first heard in *tinkle: icy, night, crystalline*. The intensity of hearing in “The Bells” hybridizes the work of the mouth and the ear, blending the two in attentive words that lean, as they sound, into sound. By imagining the mouth and the ear both as twinned organs, both speaking and hearing, Poe posits the trope of the speaking ear.

In this chapter, I explore the formal ways in which the poetic speaker listens—through rhyme and repetition, through grammatical turns and stanzaic patterns—and how this hearing can attune readers to accretive and vague violence. Although rhyme and refrain do not fit a conventional definition of violence, in this chapter I attend to Rob Nixon’s call radically to expand our understanding of violence, given what we know about the gradual and nearly unimaginable effects of toxic waste, climate change, and pollution. If our understanding of violence can open up to include dispersed and gradual accumulations, in which agency is occluded and collective, then, I argue, poetic hearing can perform analogous violence within language. How does pain collect in the ear that is the poem? In this chapter, I begin by tracing Poe’s descriptions of poetic hearing, the way it leeches the agency of the speaker and seems if not to author itself, then to collaborate in its own creation. I go on to theorize the how the speaking ear, which imagines one body part counter-intuitively performing the action of another body part, might be understood according to Poe’s notion of “perversity,” which involves contrary urges. To follow the implications of this claim is to trouble the humanistic idea that poetry is “good” for you. Indeed, “The Bells” unmakes a “you” altogether through grammatical sleights that turn away from the direct address of the lyric “you” toward more uncertain modes of address motivated by the preposition “with.” The final section of this chapter draws together the implicit violence inherent in the perversely twinned speaking hearing, the occultism found throughout Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” and “The Bells,” and Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence.” The bells create a sonic environment in which bodies of sound and bodies of flesh pollute one another; the ear is continuous with inanimate but “throbbing” bells; and intentions redound, ineffectually and perversely, back on themselves. Poe’s “Ghoul” inflict pain while experiencing pleasure, and reveal the connections between Poe’s perversity and Nixon’s notion of “long dying.”

The strange force of noise stretches its influence across Poe’s poetics. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe promises to explain his compositional practice, but in the process he puts into question his own status as author. On the one hand, his suggestion that he writes backwards—“with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (545)—evokes a picture of total mastery, the poet in algebraic

and unwavering control. On the other hand, the mathematical problem proceeds according to its own logic, objective and independent of interventions by the mathematician. This “rigid” image of a poet composing according to a formula empties out the poet’s influence. What appears at first as mastery slips away into powerlessness.

Poe would have us believe that sound itself authors “The Raven.” Before characters, plots, or meanings, Poe insists that he began with an intended “effect,” which caused him to search out a refrain closing each stanza: “That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant” (548). The ear is the speaker here; but at the same time, Poe arranges and selects, which suggests a collaboration between ear and mouth. He imagines this sonority invested with “force” and “emphasis,” and its power in this passage is held to be self-evident, “admitt[ing] no doubt.” His pronouncement of *o* and *r* as obviously the most sonorous and most producible, respectively, portrays sound, disconnected even from words, as inherently powerful. But then again, one cannot say that Poe pronounces anything here: rather, he is “inevitably led” to language’s music, a puppet pulled by strings of assonance. Of course, Poe’s essay is usually read as a spoof, and rarely taken at face value. I wonder whether at least part of that has to do with how uncomfortable it is to imagine a poem as inevitable, arising of its own accord out of sonority. I am choosing to entertain Poe’s seemingly exaggerated assertions because I believe that the idea of the poem as mysterious agent complicating the poet’s control gives insight into Poe’s poetry—not only “The Raven,” but also, as I will explore at length, “The Bells.”

After he is directed to these sounds, Poe insists that his listening speaker just as yieldingly receives the word “Nevermore”: “In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word ‘Nevermore.’ In fact, it was the very first which presented itself” (548). Sonority renders it “absolutely impossible” to avoid the word; and “nevermore,” like a breathing being, “present[s] itself” to Poe. What seems like objectivity in his description twists back and turns him, instead, into an object. Once “nevermore,” in a sense, wreaks itself on him, Poe passively continues: “The next *desideratum* was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word ‘nevermore.’” On the one hand, that Poe has a “*desideratum*” suggests that he has will; on the other hand, “nevermore” here has a strange power. As though it enchants and re-channels the force of composition to its own purposes, “nevermore” draws the poem into being as mere “pretext” for its own “continuous use.”

Agency twists and tangles in Poe’s explanations of seemingly inconsequential details:

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage—it being understood that the bust was

absolutely *suggested* by the bird—the bust of *Pallas* being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, *Pallas*, itself. (“The Philosophy of Composition” 551, Poe’s emphasis)

At first, Poe is the subject: “I made the bird alight.” But his emphasis on “*suggested*” underscores an uncertain communication between himself and his character, as though the raven is a strange collaborator. Indeed, the raven makes this suggestion through a grammatical osmosis that combines two passive constructions—“it being understood” and “was absolutely *suggested*”—to impart the bust of *Pallas*, which is not actively chosen, but “being chosen,” putting Poe on the grammatical margins of the decision. If the sonorousness of the word “*Pallas*” suggests its inclusion in the poem, then there is a way in which sound is both evidence of and other than authorial power.

## 2. Hearing Perversely, Hearing “With”

Poetic hearing challenges us to think about poetic composition as a strange collaboration of human with inhuman and unseen forces. Can this wayward sound be understood as perverse? Perversity, too, flouts the agency of the apparent subject. In “The Imp of the Perverse,” Poe defines perversity as “a paradoxical something,” which spurs a motiveless urge “to do wrong for wrong’s sake” (203). He describes it as contrary to faith, inscrutable to intellect or to logic, sinister to the life-sustaining urge to eat. Seventy-five years before Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Poe theorizes an impulse that sounds very much like the death drive. He expands the idea in “The Black Cat”:

And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only—that urged me to continue. (194)

In describing perversity’s widespread nature—“Who has not, a hundred times, found himself”—Poe also suggests a recurrence that throws the will of the subject into

question in the verb “found,” which, as a passive verb construction, hovers on the border between active and passive, and could be applied equally well to such obsessive repetitions as rhyme and refrain—the sonic joints that compel a poem to reiteration, that return sound to itself and limit the control of the poet in what Milton called “troublesome and modern bondage.”<sup>36</sup>

Insofar as agency might be understood as a life force, an ability “to act or exert power” (*OED*), and perversity as the radical unravelling or compromising of that agency, then refrain may be understood as perverse. The structure of refrain is such that it foregrounds its own repeated nature, and wears language into familiarity across the space of a poem. The refrain is a key characteristic of the speaking ear because it is a moment when the poem listens to itself. The speaking ear, likewise, reorients or misdirects the way in which bodies are expected to work. The ear governs utterance, bending the will backwards, and making the speaker simultaneously receptive and expressive. “Nevermore” takes listening’s expressive repetitions to an extreme, for as Barbara Johnson points out, the word was already a Gothic-Romantic commonplace even before its repetitions render it such in the imaginative world of “The Raven” (*A World of Difference* 97-98). Indeed, Poe foregrounds the degree to which refrain makes agency melt away. In “The Philosophy of Composition,” he describes how the continued repetition of the word “nevermore” is so irreconcilable “with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word,” that he therefore considered using a parrot, but settled on a raven because it fit the gloomy tone. Refrain puts reason itself into doubt, and slows down the forward progression of thought and movement.

This connection between thinking and unthinking language suggests extends from narrator to reader. The most common verb that Poe uses to introduce the raven’s speech is “quoth,” which he repeats five times. This verb removes the source of speech more, emphasizing its quoted nature. But it also risks the control of the narrator, who himself is quoting the raven—and, by extension, its receding layers ripple out to affect the reader. In her essay, “Strange Fits,” Barbara Johnson writes that “The Raven” is a poem about reading itself. At the beginning of the poem we interrupt the narrator reading his books of “forgotten lore,” and his interactions with the raven Johnson maps out as a series of readings—as biographical criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, reader-response criticism (*A World of Difference* 98-99). “Quoth” sets the refrain off as frame, the

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<sup>36</sup> *Paradise Lost*, “The Verse.” For an exploration of the way in which the processes of the mind are interlinked with sound, see Simon Jarvis’s “Prosody as Cognition” and his chiasmic aphorism, “Prosody, then is cognitive; cognition is also prosodic” (9). Perversity does not seem strictly cognitive for Poe, but rather, an urge that lives amphibiously in the mind and the desiring spirit. Still, Jarvis’s account of the way in which prosody trespasses and structures thought is also relevant for the relationship between sound and perversity. Modifying Jarvis’s aphorism, we might say that perversity is sonic, and sound is also perverse.

raven as the frame's repeater, the narrator as the repeater's repeater, and the reader as yet another receding layer in a soundscape whose echoes seem mechanically endless.

But perversity is more than a compulsion to repetition: it is a compulsion to harm. If poetic sound were truly perverse, it would have to introduce an interference, a disturbance—it would have to overturn, by its own ill soundings, constructive arguments that poetry is “good” for you.<sup>37</sup> This Arnoldian notion is still commonplace, even in twenty-first century discussions of poetry's purpose. The Poetry Foundation states that it exists “to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience” (“About Us”). Implicit in this aim is the assumption that poetry is inherently beneficial, part of a wholesome life. Poe's perversity of poetic sound works against this assumption. Indeed, it unmakes a “you” altogether. When the roles of speaking and hearing become obscured, obscured, too, becomes the directionality of lyric address. The traditional “you,” the listener who waits in receptivity, merges with the echoic speaker who reflects back what he hears. Agency withers at each end of the I/you duet: independent of both, Poe's poetic sound threatens traditional lyric actors, and subverts the energy of the poem away from the expected first and second person pronouns into grammar's more obscure territory.

By putting the lyric “you” under threat, poetic sound perversely slides sideways in its grammar, turning from the direct address from pronoun to pronoun to murkier, prepositional modes of being together in sound. What does it mean to hear “with”? This is what the first line of “The Bells” asks its readers to do—“Hear the sledges with the bells— / Silver bells!” (1-2)—and the poem that follows unfolds the understated stakes of this preposition. The most immediate sense of this phrase is adjectival, suggesting that the sledges have the bells attached. In another sense, to hear with means to hear alongside. We are asked to hear two sounds at once: the sledges with the bells, the sledges as subordinated sound under a louder ringing-out. This reading of “with” considers the minor noises that sing beside the dominant ding-dong; this “with” attends to the general murmur. For as soon as the sledges are raised, they fall again into the background buzz. The second line focuses on the “Silver bells,” about which the third line again exclaims “*What* a world of merriment their melody foretells!” (3). “*Their* melody” presumably refers to the bells, rather than the sledges. The minimal attention

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<sup>37</sup> This anarchic reading of the stakes of perversity goes farther than Daniel Fineman in his essay, “Poe and Perversity,” in which he connects Poe's idea of perversity with Lucretius's notion of the swerve—the phenomenon by which atoms travelling in a straight line “swerve ever so little from their course,” which according to Lucretius is the source of creation. In this reading, perversity is closer to a creative impulse than a death drive. Fineman characterizes perversity in Poe as “celebrat[ing] . . . a necessary, natural, and desirable deviation toward a paradoxically *constructive* dissolution and cosmic *reconstitution*” (68, my emphasis), and goes on to suggest that literature has an impulse to “remain intelligible” (70). While I agree with Fineman's point that Poe's concept of perversity is key to his poetics, I understand perversity as something fundamentally unhinging, unintelligible.

assigned to the sledges after the first line suggests the way in which prepositional hearing can be a hearing of the subordinated.

But as well as meaning “alongside,” hearing “with” can also mean “in addition to.” This second sense attends to the iterative, cumulative effects of hearing, and lays emphasis on “bells” as a keyword (or keynote) throughout the poem. For how do we really *hear* “the bells” in the context of a poem? We cannot hear the original sound, the one that makes the speaker exclaim, although we can imagine it, and we can hear the exclamation. What we do hear is the literal sound of “the bells,” that is the sound of the words “the bells,” which are repeated incessantly: “the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells bells—” (12-13). In this sense, hearing *with* the bells evokes a sequence: bells with bells with bells with bells with bells (like Kanye West’s “Maybachs on bachs on bachs on bachs on bachs” [“Gotta Have It”]), many bells. Do each of these words that sound the same sound the same sound? The effect of repetition this extreme is a performative imitation of actual tolling.

The question of hearing “with” becomes more thorny as the poem progresses. In each stanza, “bells” provokes a new and progressively ominous-becoming-miserable response, which raises the question of interpretation with fresh urgency. In the first stanza, the bells foretell “a world of merriment” (3); in the second stanza, the seemingly same sound “Of the bells, bells, bells, / Of the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells—” (32-34) peals over a wedding, promising “a world of happiness” (17); in the third stanza, the “bells, bells, bells” (51) tell a “tale of terror”; while in the fourth and final stanza, the same “bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells—” (111-112) emit a “moaning” and “groaning” (113) in a ghastly land of “Ghouls” (88). By threading the same word in the same repetitive refrain through wildly different contexts, Poe puts the act of interpretation into question. Hearing “with” becomes uncertain, for each layering of the word evokes a different response. If the refrain in the fourth stanza causes misery, then the refrain in the first stanza becomes proleptically polluted; all refrains recur, and in a sense hear, “with” their other iterations.

Keeping this latest, contaminating sense of hearing “with” ringing in our ears, we can return to the first line of the poem: “Hear the sledges with the bells.” If we register this line as anticipating the violence to come, trespassing beyond its apparent context, then there is also a way in which the “sledges” deviate from their most immediate meaning of “carriage on runners for travelling across snow and ice,” and wander into possible evocation of the “large heavy hammer usually wielded with both hands, especially the large hammer used by a blacksmith” (*OED*). Although this reading rubs against the grain of the stanza’s context, it does fit the hammering later in the poem: the “clang and clash and roar” (54) of the third stanza, and the “[i]ron bells”

(71) of the fourth.<sup>38</sup> And because the stanzas are so intricately interrelated, the later violence dares and daunts earlier imaginings of peace. In this way, Poe's language is disobedient, swerving out of expected interpretations—and indeed questioning the validity of interpretation itself. For in the sonic realm, there is no difference between “sledge” and “sledge,” much in the same way that the single word “bells” causes such varied responses.<sup>39</sup> The sledgehammer was already latent.

Indeed, the latent sledgehammer can be read as a metaphor for the way in which beauty and violence cleave together, perversely, in poetic sound. A hammer is frequently used to strike a bell to make it ring, and in this way the sound of the sledges *is*, somehow, the sound of the bells; hearing *with* becomes the deviance of the pun, which strikes two meanings with one twinned sound. In *Reading the Illegible*, Craig Dworkin explores this way in which language is indifferent to and independent of the human mouths that pronounce it. Dworkin uses a theoretical framework from de Man, Lyotard, and Oppen to define “inhumanness.” For de Man, inhumanness connotes:

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<sup>38</sup> The perversity of this patterning—in which a correspondence of sound reveals sound's disjunctions—speaks to the tangled connotations in the very word “sound.” A perverse sound would unmake sound, introduce harm to itself. In “Romantic Measures: Stressing the Sound of Sound,” Susan J. Wolfson numbers these meanings in a passage that I will quote at length because its own sonic richness renders it unparaphraseable: “One of the most intense words for interpretation, I propose, is sound, the very word its event, the instance coincident with the reference. By this force, sound advances a meta-trope for poetry in the ear, heard or silently audited. It gains force, too, from being (accidentally) a resonant homophone, variously drawn out from different etymologies, which come together, by chance or choice, from a prodigal polyglot past. There is the Latin *sonare*: the very word like a bell for poets, the fount of sonnet (little sound) and persona (sounding through). Petitioning for, and sometimes crowding into the same literal space, there are the Old English tributes of sound (measure the depths); from a different source, sound as stable, free from defect; and with a slight shift (as in sound asleep), whole, entire. And there are the waters (more etymology yet) in Milton's poetry of Creation, ‘Sounds and Seas’ (PL, 6.399). Double-playing sound as verb and adjective, Marvell's wry lines on Clora's tears evoke measure, depth, and firmness: ‘The Indian slaves / That sink for pearl through seas profound / Would find her tears yet deeper waves / And not of one the bottom sound.’ All these sounds play as synchronic kin, a fortune of phonemic confluence that condenses new sense, richer resources” (57-58).

<sup>39</sup> Craig Dworkin argues that noise forces readers and writers into making ethical decisions. He reads Susan Howe's poetry as associating the “noise” of difficulty with political violence, and Jacques Attali's prose as reading music as an anticipation of social change. But ultimately for Dworkin, what noise demands is that the “message” itself be unsettled: an ethical encounter with noise “must try to avoid co-opting those disruptions for its own rhetorical ends, and might instead attempt to communicate noise in the way one might communicate a disease” (49). For Dworkin, noise is visual, involving “graphic maneuvers” that can be “at the service of finely modulating a vocal realization of the poem” (32). Poe's noise, on the other hand, is aural, but it similarly resists “message” by confusing same-sounding messages with one another.



linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have. (de Man, quoted in Dworkin 77)

Dworkin points out that the materiality, the noise, and the indifference of language is relentless and always in excess of semantics. His example is the way “laughter” inescapably lives in “slaughter” (quoted in Dworkin 78). As Lyotard puts it, “Matter . . . ignores us. It made us the way it made all bodies—by chance and according to its laws” (quoted in Dworkin 78). Oppen calls this the “‘heartlessness’ of words,” suggesting that “a pure language . . . would be entirely freed from the illusion of meaning” (quoted in Dworkin 78). Although Dworkin’s theoretical framework is twentieth-century and his poetic examples are taken from recent language poetry, Poe’s bracingly inhuman bells—and the doubt they throw on certainty in interpretation—nevertheless could be understood within the same structure (or post-structure).<sup>40</sup> Like the laughter in slaughter, Poe’s sledges retain the ghostly ringing-out of sledges, and his jingling bells “heartlessly” anticipate the “moaning and the groaning of the bells” (113) in the poem’s final line.

If perversity threatens wholesome life force and corrodes the poem’s sense of direct listening in favor of a warped and indirect hearing-cum-speaking, even so does it deny a settled sense of inhumanity. For the bells, mysterious agents of poetic sound, rivals of authorial power, and metaphors for the inhumanity of poetic language, are not strictly inhuman. The “moaning and the groaning of the bells” quoted above suggests a blending between machine and human voice that puts any stable categorization of the bells into question. Indeed, the integrity of poetic sound perverts by its own self-conflicting forces. Not only figures for and performances of refrain’s repetitions, the bells also pronounce a speech-like “rhyming and . . . chiming” (35). This suggests at once the inhuman, chiming quality of rhyme—as well as the humanity of the bells’ iterations. The fact that “rhyme” and “chime” actually do rhyme further performs the way in which the actual clang of the bells *is*, somehow, a rhyme embodied.

In *Romantic Cyborgs*, Klaus Benesch has analyzed Poe’s hybridity as cyborgian, focusing particularly on the technological qualities of Poe’s language, both in “The

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<sup>40</sup> In this way, Poe’s bells also run counter to the logic of J. H. Prynne’s “mental ears,” which he sets out in “Mental Ears and Poetic Work.” For Prynne, the poet’s mental ears pick up subtle correspondences between sounds and half-sounds within and across a text. He argues: “that a phonological analysis of poetic speech usage may disclose base-level rule patterns and their historical evolutionary forms; and that such analysis may provide a diagnostic template for some of the ways in which an attentive reader of poems may intuitively model the surface features of performance into a mental representation of signifying relations and connections within the textual ordering of poetic language in action” (132). Poe’s perverse bells mystify the mastery described here, in which the poet’s superhero power is heightened hearing, patching together phonemes and rhythms at long distance—not mental ears but metal ears.

Bells,” and in his nonfiction prose. He reads the technologizing language in Poe’s nonfiction prose pieces such as “Anastatic Printing,” “Maelzel’s Chess-Player” and “The Philosophy of Composition” as explorations of the professionalization of literature that, Benesch argues, stand in opposition to European Romanticism. Benesch notes that Poe’s technologically-laden terminology—his “[w]heels, pinions, tackles, step-ladders, demon-traps” (101)—expresses a utilitarian attitude characteristic of Jacksonian America, and one which European Romanticism resisted. While Benesch sets European Romanticism and American Romanticism in neat conflict with one another—one resisting technology and the other welcoming it, one advocating “originality” and the other questioning proprietorship over ideas—I would argue, in contrast, that Poe’s technologizing language stands in conflict with itself, and ultimately reveals more continuity than discontinuity with European Romanticism.

Benesch suggests that Poe sets himself against the “ideological assumptions about the content and production of art” that Benesch identifies with Romantic poets, and that Poe shifts to a “technological, constructivist explanation of how and why art works” (100). He quotes the following passage from “The Philosophy of Composition”:

Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of ideas that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps—the cock’s feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which, in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrion*. (544)

For Benesch, this passage divides Poe from those who would obscure the “wheels and pinions,” and establishes his mechanistic language. I would like to push against this reading by arguing that the passage, although it purports to condemn the “fine frenzy” of other poets, weaves bits of glimmering string into the rational, an obscure glistening which I will call occult. Even the long sentence in which Poe refuses the “fine frenzy” reads, in its dashing from clause to clause, as rather frenzied, and certainly fine. I choose the term occult for the way it signifies both in the context of knowledge and in the context of magic. The *OED* defines the occult as that which is “[n]ot apprehended, by the mind; beyond ordinary understanding or knowledge,” and “[o]f or relating to magic.” Both of these senses are important in a discussion of Poe’s poetry, and especially “The Bells,” which hinges dually on questions of what the ear “knows” (57),

and the mysterious magic of the “runic rhyme” (10, 97, 102, 107). In both cases for Poe, the occult is sonic.

There’s a fascinating tension in Poe between the rational and the magical. On the one hand, Poe rejects the “ecstatic intuition” by which poets claim to compose. On the other hand, the mundane materials with which he aligns himself never fully succeed in shaking off the ecstatic. “[W]heels and pinions” refer to the organs of clocks, watches, and trains. The larger gears are called “wheels,” and the smaller ones that mesh into the larger are called “pinions.” The step-ladder could belong in a mechanical workshop or a theatrical set alternately; and the demon-trap evokes the trap door of a stage, following the theatrical imagery in the passage. Or does it? Although the devil’s trap sounds at first as though it fits, in fact it introduces a new strain of imagery. A devil’s trap is a rune used to control demons and evil spirits—a machine for the spiritual world. The difference between a material machine and a spiritual one is that the former works logically, while the latter works with mystery—perhaps even according to “fine frenzy” and “ecstatic intuition.” The demon trap introduces a perversity, a swerve, to the logic of the sentence. Do “the cock’s feathers, the red paint and the black patches” that follow belong on a theatrical set, or in an occult ritual? They could fit in either register. Feathers have been used for centuries to decorate the pentacles commonly used in the demon-trap rune. Likewise, red paint and black patches could adorn and help to effect a spell as much as they could a performance.

In its sense of being “not manifest to direct observation; discoverable only by experiment; unexplained; latent” (*OED*), the “occult” bears strong ties to the perverse, which likewise moves according to latent and inexplicable rules, or chaos. Both dangerously engage with the automatic in ways that put traditional order at risk; that is, both “work,” but this working may be harmful and illogical. As we have seen, for Poe, the perverse sets contrary urges in motion in ways that are at once “paradoxical” and predictable (“The Imp of the Perverse” 203). “Have we not,” Poe asks, “a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such?” (“The Black Cat” 194). Thus even while the perverse flouts laws, its “perpetual inclination” to do so is like a spiritual mechanism, a law against laws. Calling attention to the automatic functions of the breathing body alongside the machinelike propulsions of the sinning soul, Poe writes in “The Imp of the Perverse,” “I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable *force* which impels us to its prosecution” (203). Poe insists on the occult nature of perversity, which will in no way “admit of analysis”: “It is a radical, a primitive impulse—elementary” (203). The word “impulse” unites what is automatic in the body—the “wave of change which travels through nerve and muscle in passing from rest into action” (*OED*)—and the machine—the “sudden, momentary change in voltage or current” (*OED*). It also enfolds the word “imp,” which evokes the mythological realm of goblins, fairies, and demon-traps.

Likewise, the demon-trap detains evil spirits within its inky lines, but according to a “perpetual inclination” or “unconquerable *force*” that is ultimately unknowable. Indeed, the demon-trap foregrounds the automatic nature of language itself, since the rune functions not only like a magical spell, but also like a poetic spell, or a series of words spelled on paper. Language too, “works,” though it retains its mystery, as we have seen, though its stubborn inhumanness.

In this way, perversity, the occult, and poetic sound twine into and through one another. All three involve the obscure working of a force beyond the control of the agent made passive. The etymology of “occult” is from the Latin word, *occultus*, meaning secret, or hidden from the understanding. It also relates to the Latin word for eye, *oculus*, which suggests that the occult’s hiding is specifically visual: unseen. Perhaps what the eye cannot see is sound. Poe’s poetry suggests that the submerged forces of poetic sound move according to a perverse design that challenges the art of the author. What is automatic about hearing in “The Bells” is occult. Two paired lines in the third stanza hinge on a machinery that remains utterly enigmatic:

Yet the ear it fully knows,  
     By the twanging  
     And the clanging,  
 How the danger ebbs and flows;  
 Yet the ear distinctly tells,  
     In the jangling  
     And the wrangling,  
 How the danger sinks and swells,—  
 By the sinking or the swelling in the anger of the bells,  
     Of the bells,  
 Of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
     Bells, bells, bells—  
 In the clamor and the clangor of the bells! (57-69)

The first of these lines is “Yet the ear, it fully knows” (57). What—and how—does the ear know? Poe suggests that the “twanging” and “clanging” of the bells gives the ear its knowledge of the fire’s destruction. It is a knowledge that is automatic and immediate, an interpretation of sounds. But its very immediacy collapses the steps by which interpretation can be analyzed and understood. Indeed, it is of the species of the “fine frenzy” and “ecstatic intuition,” which also know according to sound’s quick touch. If the ear’s knowledge is a knowledge that cannot be understood, then it can be said to be occult.

The second of the paired lines is “Yet, the ear distinctly tells” (61). Although in one way, this second line simply parallels the first, in another way it extends the ear’s

strange power. For in this line, the ear not only knows, but also speaks. Importantly, the ear “*distinctly* tells,” suggesting, first, that it tells clearly, and, second, that it tells in a way that is distinct from the telling of the mouth. Whereas the mouth speaks in language, the ear speaks in sounds that may make up words, and may exceed language altogether. The focus of this stanza is sound’s pressing and sensual insistence. Beyond language, the ear tells “In the jangling / And the wrangling,” dissonant sounds which communicate immediate news. The exaggerated rhyme between “jangling” and “wrangling” makes it possible to read the ear’s telling as the expression of poetic sound itself. Although the words of the stanza technically mean in language, they straddle the border between language and noise. “[T]wanging,” “clanging,” “jangling,” and “wrangling,” all repeat a heavy “ging” and “gling” rhyme, as though the words themselves were gonging bells. And it would be impossible to miss the rhyme between “the ear distinctly tells” and all of the many “bells, bells, bells,” a rhyme that sonically fuses the speech of the ear and the speech of the bells and hints that they might be talking the same ringing language. The ear’s knowledge wanders beyond knowledge and, in the same way, the ear’s language exceeds language.<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Occult Knowledge, or, Slow Violence and Poetic Hearing

In the last section, we saw how the grammatical slipperiness inherent in hearing “with” creates a perverse uncertainty in the logic of stanzaic progression, in which each stanza is heard with the stanza before and after. In this section, I would like to meditate further on the temporal disarray demanded by the ear, but to think specifically of how the occult informs (if informs verges on uninforms) poetic time. Thinking about occult temporalities in regions obscurely defined by diffuse agents—poetic sound or subtle violence—becomes particularly urgent in the twenty-first century, and the context of what Rob Nixon calls “slow violence.” At the end of this chapter, I will suggest some ways in which Poe’s perverse speaking ear and its occult times and places enriches discussions of slow violence. The contaminated and pain-charged soundscapes of poetry are more—not less—needed now, as we listen and live in a world made noisy by unequal and unknowable violence.

Imagery of magic snakes through not only Poe’s prose, as we have discussed, but also through “The Bells.” Both the first and the second stanzas begin in a prophetic register:

Hear the sledges with the bells,  
Silver bells!

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<sup>41</sup> The well-known etymological connection between “to wander” and “to err” reinforces the submerged resonances here of swerving perversity.

*What a world of merriment their melody foretells! (1-3)*

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Hear the mellow wedding bells,  
Golden bells!

*What a world of happiness their harmony foretells! (15-17)*

How can “melody” and “harmony” be considered prophetic? As in “The Philosophy of Composition,” Poe here mystifies the technical. For, from a technical standpoint, a melody already prophesies the melody to come, anticipates the next note by an inner logic of harmony. Rhyme becomes prophetic when the “bells” of the first and second lines of the stanzas anticipate the rhyming word, “foretells,” which itself foretells the “bells, bells, bells, bells” refrain. Further, these tightly mirrored stanzas establish a predictable structure for the poem. Each stanza begins with an invocation to the reader to hear, followed by several exclamations, a description of the particular bell’s sound, and the insistent refrain, “bells, bells, bells, bells.” There is a way in which Poe, by patterning each stanza so closely on the one before and the one to come, renders each line into a refrain, rather than only portions of the stanza. This pattern effects the characteristically paradoxical effect, on the one hand, of making each stanza ear-numbingly predictable, even mundane, and, on the other hand, of making each stanza into a chant or mantra. The ritual of repetition itself creates the prophetic power; that is, simply because each stanza is nearly the same, each stanza can predict and be predicted.<sup>42</sup>

Or can it? Even while the music of each stanza remains consistent, the affect, as we have seen, radically decomposes over the course of the poem, which renders initial prophecies of “merriment” and “happiness” suspect. Indeed, what is magical here is also perverse, lined with a velvet irony that runs, smooth and assonant, under the apparently peppy rhymes. One doubts the scenery of these stanzas, which load up cliché after cliché as though they were being written by an echoing ear that only repeats phrases frequently spoken. As Barbara Johnson observes in the context of “The Raven,” the images in “The Bells” are dully, deliberately familiar. Johnson shows how “The Raven” is a poem of clichés, from its refrain “nevermore,” which Johnson calls “a pure poetic cliché” (*A World of Difference* 98), to the rest of its hand-me-down poetic furniture: “ember, remember, December, midnight, darkness, marble busts” (98). The cliché compromises narratorial art by putting originality into question and showing the degree to which language is a Frankensteinian monster of skin grafts and exhumed

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<sup>42</sup> In “Breaking into Song: Some Notes on Refrain,” John Hollander points out that Poe’s raven speaks with the force of prophecy 1) historically, through its relation to the classical ravens, whose cry was rendered in Latin as “cras cras cras,” or “tomorrow, tomorrow” 2) literally, through its prediction “nevermore,” and 3) formally, through its utterance of refrain (73).

poetic parts.<sup>43</sup> The wedding in the second stanza of “The Bells” gives one pause, for its clichés foreground what is ritualistic in marriage, and empty out pretensions to originality of experience, and originality of feeling:

Through the balmy air of night  
 How they ring out their delight!  
 From the molten-golden notes,  
 And all in tune,  
 What a liquid ditty floats  
 To the turtle-dove that listens, while she gloats  
 On the moon! (18-24)

The “balmy air” suggests yet another summer wedding, and the rhyme between “night” and “delight” creates its own form of cliché—a cliché of the ear. “[M]olten-golden” synaesthetically endows sound with a warm color and liquid-smooth texture, where yellow signifies springtime renewal and hope, as well as, more cynically, a silken opulence. A “turtle-dove” joins the fray of familiarity, “gloat[ing],” while the addition of “the moon” across an enjambment turns the line break into a comedic pause—it’s impossible to imagine any more clichés jammed in, until that moon arrives, exclaimatorily. Once we have pieced the sentence together, once the enjambment delivers a direct object for the turtle-dove’s gloating, the direction of the gloat emphasizes the self-consciousness of this excess. Why would a turtle-dove gloat on a moon? She is an ironic turtle-dove laughing at the saccharine symbol, and laughing at the wedding itself. In case we were not sure how to read the moon, Poe empties out any remaining romance in the image as the poem continues. A later-yet-contemporary moon shines on the fire and through the “mad expostulation” (45) and “shriek[ing]” (42) of the alarm bells. The “pale-faced moon” (50) sheds the same silver light on the wedding as the fire, entwining them in an unlikely and ironic marriage.

Poetic sound obscures temporalities.<sup>44</sup> Although prophecy perceives the future and sets up the conditions for closure, the word “foretells” completes a rhyme that has

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<sup>43</sup> In “Poe’s Lyrical Media: The Raven’s Returns,” Eliza Richards traces the reception of “The Raven,” along with accusations of the poem’s derivativeness. Richards points out that Poe met these accusations by emphasizing the poem’s sources. He reviewed Elizabeth Barrett’s poems just before “The Raven” was published and points out the connection to “Barnaby Rudge” in “The Philosophy of Composition” (205). In an 1845 edition of the *New York Illustrated Magazine*, a reviewer said that Poe’s “‘Raven’ is more remarkable for its mechanical construction than for its spirit of poetry” (quoted in Richards 205).

<sup>44</sup> In *Poetry and The Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart calls this temporal interloping a “possession” (107-144). Emily Dickinson’s hymn meters and John Keats’s ballad stanzas are metrically haunted by their sonic pasts, as the rhythms that make up poems remember past poems, and reveal sound as a thing undead. Simon Jarvis describes a similar effect in “Prosody as Tradition,” when he writes that tradition is

already occurred. If the bells are bad prophets (bad either in the sense of incompetent, or in the sense of insidious) whose predictions of “merriment” and “happiness” instead bring “terror” (38) and “solemn thought” (72), then what is pleasurable in the first two stanzas is not that which the prophecy predicts, but rather the embodied and immediate experience of rhyme itself. Prophecy and rhyme operate on different time scales.

Whereas prophecy predicts a future at long distance—years or generations away—rhyme predicts a sound at close range. Poe puts prophecy in “The Bells” on a sliding time scale so that it can either perversely foretell the opposite of what happens, or it can truthfully point to the momentary pleasure of a rhyme just now completed. In this way, Poe chiastically canonizes the miniature. Rhyme approximates prophecy, while prophecy approximates rhyme. Indeed, from the perspective of the poem’s sound, misery is just as delicious as ecstasy. The third and fourth stanzas proceed with as many frills and trills as the first and second. How distressed is a distress that rhymes? The “throbbing” (102) and “sobbing” (104) in the fourth stanza may be semantically removed from the “jingling” (14) and “tinkling” (14) in the first, but sensually they are similar. Both evoke the same slight electrical thrill that rhyme gives the ear.

Even the grammar of prophecy wavers between the future and the present. In the second stanza, the speaker exclaims:

*What a gush of euphony voluminously wells!*  
     How it swells!  
     How it dwells  
     On the Future! how it tells  
     Of the rapture that impels  
 To the swinging and the ringing  
     Of the bells, bells, bells. (26-32)

Present and future curl in and out of one another in this passage. The “gush of euphony” both “wells” and “swells” in the present, an overpowering and magnificent sound that we hear now. But the “dwell[ing]” that the euphony does is not on the present but “[o]n the Future.” Further, it “tells” of future raptures. But the verb “impels” introduces a grammatical blip into the lines that jolts the future back into the present. In the context of the euphony’s dwelling on the future, the “rapture” at first seems like it, too, will take place in a time to come. But the enjambment complicates this reading, for “impels / To the swinging and the ringing / Of the bells” does not quite

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the condition of possibility for thought: “To think is to think within a tradition, whether we like it or not” (156). He goes on, like Stewart, to posit meter as one way that tradition makes itself palpable. Likewise, Susan J. Wolfson writes that “poetry is for ever a sounding of received words with tributes of one’s own” (73). All three of these models obscure temporal agency. Who is acting in the present if not the past?



make sense. The rapture could not impel *to* the ringing if it happened in the future. The jolt of enjambment sets up a backwards domino effect, in which we must revise in succession the lines that came before: the transitive form of “impel” brings the verb back from the future into the present; then, its agent, “rapture,” returns to the present along with it; and by extension, the “tell[ing]” and the “dwell[ing]” on the “Future” all shrink in range, referring to the future that is now. The immediate rapture in the present impels the bells to the swinging and ringing that we currently hear (here). In this way, Poe slyly inscribes the wedding’s happiness within the ceremony of the wedding itself.

Timescales and tenses blur in “The Bells” and magic inheres in this blending. One of the refrains of the poem, repeated three times, is the incantation, “Keeping time, time, time, / In a sort of Runic rhyme” (9-10; 96-97; 100-101). What is a runic rhyme and how is it different from a regular rhyme? If this couplet were a form of enchantment, its spell might be the way it grafts rhyme into time, or poetic sound into meter. Bells in a clocktower mark the hours of the day, while these poetic bells mark the feet of the line. In a poem whose meter is notoriously treacherous,<sup>45</sup> the heavy spondees of “time, time, time” unambiguously insist on a weighty and slow scansion. Characteristically, Poe makes his rhyme performative by rhyming on the word “rhyme.” The fact that “time” initiates the rhyming couplet further performs the interlinking of meter and music. There is a secularizing force in this sorcery, for rather than performing their traditional function of calling worshippers to pray, these bells deliberately mark “time, time, time” (anticipating embittered T. S. Eliot’s Saint Mary Woolnoth keeping the hours with “a dead sound”). But in contrast to Eliot’s solipsistic fragmentation, Poe’s runic rhyme creates a form of time that reveals the connections between things. This time cannot be separated from the material music of the poem’s words themselves, from the music of

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<sup>45</sup> In his article “‘The Bells,’ Performance, and the Politics of Poetry,” as well as his later chapter, “The Politics of a Poetry without Politics” in *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe*, which expands on the article, Jerome McGann elaborates the issue of performing “The Bells.” He describes how the italics on the word “*What*” throughout “The Bells” can be interpreted as a sort of musical score, a sign to scan and therefore perform the poem in a certain way. This leads to McGann’s suggestion that the poem is “a music lesson” (“The Bells” 56). Although it is unclear where the “Politics” of McGann’s title lie, it seems as though they are associated with metrical decision-making. The disordered prosody of “The Bells” in turn disorders our senses and wakes us “at our most elementary level of human attention” (“The Bells” 56). But whereas for McGann, the politics of the poem seems to involve making decisions about scansion, decisions that translate into decisions about interpretation, I would suggest, in contrast, that choosing is precisely what the poem does not allow you to do. This too is a politics, but not one that reaffirms and “reflect[s] our understandings and hence . . . our world” (“The Bells” 56), but rather one that obscures our understandings and hence reveals our world to be not ours. Earlier, I suggested that Poe’s perversity unmakes the lyric “you”; likewise, these ubiquitous bells bare the exclusivity of the rhetorical “ours.” Poe’s bells throw open the collective pronoun by challenging his readers actually to imagine collectivity in all its difficulty and danger.

the bells described and imagined, and from every body, whether human, ghoul, turtle-dove, or even the icy air itself, that moves and pulses in this bell-built world. Runic rhyme obscures distinctions between living and inanimate bodies, which sound together in sound.<sup>46</sup>

Yet in exploring mysterious connectivity, Poe's "The Bells" shows how terrifying togetherness can be. In what follows, I would like to consider some ways in which Poe's perverse and occult poetic sound takes on new urgency in our contemporary landscape. I believe that Poe's diffuse depiction of violence in "The Bells" can help us re-define violence along Rob Nixon's terms. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Nixon presses for an updated definition of violence, one that takes into account the way in which violence obscures our understandings of space and time. He demands that we "complicate conventional assumptions about violence as a highly visible act that is newsworthy because the event is focused, time bound, and body bound" (3). Nixon defines slow violence as:

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (2)

The diffuse agents of our world—corporations, whose bodies and sprawling minds cannot be located with precision—invest in keeping this uncertain violence mysterious. What I want to highlight here is the way in which agents of violence must, in the contemporary understanding, become obscured. As we have seen, through readings of "The Bells" and "The Philosophy of Composition," poetry can problematize existing understandings of agency through an attention to sound. Poe's sonic effects perversely mingle the work of the mouth with the work of the ear, so that the true "speaker" becomes uncertain. Our twenty-first century world has become a world of diffuse

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<sup>46</sup> In her gorgeous article, "Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph," Debra Fried considers the relationship between repetition and death. She quotes Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan: "Inertia, the quiescence before and after human life, is a state of undifferentiated matter, of over-sameness, and it is perhaps only in such a state that complete repetition is possible. Complete repetition, then, is death, or—if one prefers—eternity, as Kierkegaard says from a religious standpoint, both being, however, beyond life and beyond narrative" (quoted in Fried 624). Fried explores how Poe's "incantatory lyrics" meditate on death through the mournful force of repetition. I would expand this reading by looking to the unsettling incantations of "The Bells," in which death and life, living and non-living become obscured in repetitive sound.

agency, in which unknown actors on one side of the globe affect unknown victims on the other. When violence is effected by the ghosts of actions—by trash, emissions, and toxic runoff, for example—who can be said to act? Poetry that questions and unmakes agency can engage powerfully in this contemporary discourse of corrupted power (and corrupt powers).

Nixon says that “To talk about slow violence, then, is to engage directly with our contemporary politics of speed” (11). Poetry is particularly poised to critique a culture of speed, to refuse linear narrative, and wait suspended in an absence of understanding that need never reach understanding. In this way, poems go on even after they are apparently finished; without resolution, poems may be said to unfold forever. In “The Rejection of Closure,” Lyn Hejinian connects the unending indecisions of an “open text” with the parallel openness of a “vast and overwhelming” world, where

each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaning-full, unfixed, and certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one’s ability to make distinctions. The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening. (41)

In the same way, the unknowable, occult qualities of poetry indirectly express the inconclusive qualities of slow violence. Half-echoes across stanzas, as immaterial as smog, neither promise nor provide the conclusiveness of fact that Nixon values—but in their refusal to do so, they lend special insight into the subtleties of slow violence. In one way, the timescales of slow violence and of Poe’s “The Bells” are different. The sound of the poem lasts the space of the page, while toxins last for elongated lifetimes, many human lifetimes over. But in another way, there is a direct analogy between the ringing of the bells and slow violence. We never hear the bells peal in realtime, but only encounter them as print. Bells whose sound is printed seep into time through the medium of the poem itself. By calling attention to sound continually deferred, sound in traces, sound that will continue to peal and not-peal indefinitely, for as long as the poem circulates, “The Bells” demonstrates a perverse relation to immediacy.

In addition to distorting time, the bells reveal space as an interconnected network, in which agency, and by extension violence, is difficult to trace. The bells create what R. Murray Schafer has influentially called a “soundscape.” In *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, Bruce R. Smith defines a soundscape as a collection of environmental sounds in which some sounds bear particular significance:

In a given locality sounds present continuities over time. Certain sounds—the rushing waters of a river, the rumble of automobile traffic, the creaking of a

water-powered mill, the clatter of a factory, the hum of fluorescent lighting— emerge as “keynote” sounds, as constants against which other sounds are heard and interpreted. (44)

Bells are not directed to any one person, but rather they sound out across a landscape.<sup>47</sup> In this way, listening to bells is a form of listening that exceeds the human; animals listen, buildings listen, rocks listen (and echo back). Bells structure a landscape and they constitute an atmosphere. They effect what Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* calls “unisonance,” an “experience of simultaneity” (149)—but whereas this simultaneity for Anderson occurs among speakers of the same language in the same place, the bells strip away the language from the place and make the imagined community one of extra-linguistic being together. When bells sound in an environment, the whole landscape (soundscape) hears the bells. As we have seen, Poe sends the sounds of bells ricocheting off words, which themselves become part of the soundscape. Onomatopoeic words embody the actual sound of bells, as though they bend to, change under, the dominating and deforming sound of the bells. Words like tinkle, oversprinkle, twinkle; the word bells itself; shriek; twanging, clanging, jangling, wrangling; clamour, clangour, tolling, rolling, swells, yells, all roll the sound of bells back and forth across words, through the environment of the poem itself.

Smith compares the sonic environment to an ecological system: “like other such systems it can be balanced or unbalanced, viable or dysfunctional” (44). In “The Bells,” the ringing sound dominates its environment:

Hear the tolling of the bells,  
 Iron bells!  
*What* a world of solemn thought their monody compels!  
 In the silence of the night  
 How we shiver with affright  
 At the melancholy menace of their tone!  
 For every sound that floats  
 From the rust within their throats  
 Is a groan. (70-78)

The bells “compel[.]” not just hearing, but also an entire “world.” They become the definitive characteristic of the environment, and in this way they create their

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<sup>47</sup> Eliza Richards describes a similar generality in the context of “The Raven” in her chapter, “Poe’s Lyrical Media,” pointing out that the poem “marks itself as a medium of mass communication, as a vehicle for voices, but for no voice in particular” (207). Richards compares the poem to a vocal “instrument,” and connects its interest in appealing to a generality of voices to the ease and immediacy with which it was added to elocution manuals, consistently rewritten and restaged.

surroundings, drawing a circle of sound around so that all who hear participate in this community. The shivering “we” is indeterminate and unnumbered, including all who can be affected by the imperative “hear,” whether human listeners who understand the word, or animal listeners whose ears pick up the sound. This suffusing sound also vibrates through and past the divisions of animacy. The inanimate bells are yet the agents of the poem, and Poe consistently confuses their metallic bodies with fleshly ones. The bells have “rust within their throats” and they toll out of “sounding cells.” Their ringing oscillates on the border of speech: “they ring out their delight”; they “rhyme”; they “shriek, shriek”; they show “anger” and “melancholy meaning”; they are “throbbing” and “sobbing,” “moaning” and “groaning.” These personifications are double-edged, for they can apply either to a machine or a human. That the bells have rust in their throats personifies them by endowing them with throats, but to have rust in one’s throat is also an idiom for having mucus in one’s throat, or a weak voice. Likewise, the bells’ ringing—the compulsive repetition of “bells, bells, bells, bells, / bells, bells, bells”—makes the speaker sound as though he is either sputtering at the height of emotional intensity, or repeating as automatically and unfeelingly as a machine. Bodies are continuous with landscape, inextricable from the sound and the agents of sound.

In the world that the bells create, there is no logic of living and non-living, but only a logic of ringing. When the alarm bells peal, they peal:

In the startled ear of night  
 How they scream out their affright!  
 Too much horrified to speak,  
 They can only shriek, shriek,  
 Out of tune,  
 In a clamorous appealing to the mercy of the fire,  
 In a mad expostulation with the deaf and frantic fire. (39-45)

Although night has a “startled ear,” the fire is “deaf and frantic.” Indeed, that the fire cannot hear provokes a “clamorous appealing” and a “mad expostulation,” more surprise than the surprised hearing of the night air. Why can the night hear and the fire not hear? Although both night and fire are inanimate, the listening of the former and deafness of the latter is unpredictable. Lines later, and with equal illogic, the speaker exclaims, “What a horror they outpour / In the bosom of the palpitating air” (55-56). Sonic vibrations become a beating breast, fraught with the receptive emotion of listening. Neither can slow violence be said to act, or not act. Doing both and neither, it hangs suspended in an agential twilight, where the remnants of actions (in the form of toxic waste, or the aftereffects of an oil spill) inflict slow damage after the apparent “event” has long passed. The way that Poe unhinges power from living beings and

embodies it in a sound, which itself permeates both living and nonliving bodies, shows an uncanny insight into new dynamics of agency in the post-industrial world. What the poem makes audible are the taut interrelationships between environments inside poems, outside poems, and across poems. Sound rolls through all things, and contaminates all things. Part of the sonic and affective force of the “startled ear of night” is its Miltonic echo; we hear in these clamorous alarm bells the hellish howl in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, whose thunder “tore Hells Concave, and beyond / Frighted the Reign of Chaos and old Night” (1.542-3). Not only are bodies within Poe continuous with one another, but they also stretch across and through the environments of other poems—to Milton’s hell and back.

Poe’s re-sounding of Milton’s hell as a hell of connectivity is chillingly canny in the twenty-first century. In Poe’s “The Bells,” an untraceable violence wreaks its unwilling permeations on language, and its unequal weights on sound. Repetition, rhyme, and onomatopoeia turn agents into objects and objects into agents. Times converge and times rearrange, times hover, stand still, and stop up under the unspectacular force of refrain. In the final stanza of the poem, the affective disjunctions throughout come to a concentrated point. The Ghouls who ring the iron bells experience pleasure while they inflict pain. They “Feel a glory in so rolling / On the human heart a stone” (84-85), and the king’s “merry bosom swells” (93) to a sound that hits human ears as agony. This merriness stands in contrast with the “sobbing of the bells” (104), the “moaning and the groaning of the bells” (113). Across sonic landscapes, the obscure connections between sounders and receivers of sound model uneven distributions of power. Poe’s indeterminate “we,” which unites living and non-living bodies in a continuity based on their physical proximity, reveals how fraught environmental issues around unconscious communities play out in language itself. The way in which control slips away from the speaker, into the environment and back again, raises the question of who counts as an agent, and by extension, who counts as a victim. Poe’s Ghouls allow insight into empire’s cultivated insensitivity. Nixon writes, “It is a pervasive condition of empires that they affect great swathes of the planet without the empire’s populace being aware of that impact—indeed, without being aware that many of the affected places even exist” (35). No longer is it possible for Americans to say what wars we are waging, and where. Listening to the minor and insignificant echoes and half-echoes that constitute violence in the unimportant environment of a poem trains the ear to perceive slow violence in lines as in life. Poets are the unacknowledged listeners of the world—but perversely, not for redemption, not for comfort.

Chapter Four  
**“the Conscious Ear”: Emily Dickinson’s Vibrational Poetics**

**1. “the Conscious Ear”**

The Spirit is the Conscious Ear.  
 We actually Hear  
 When We inspect—that’s audible—  
 That is admitted—Here—

For other Services—as Sound—  
 There hangs a smaller Ear  
 Outside the Castle—that Contain—  
 The other—only—Hear—  
 (J733, Fr718)<sup>48</sup>

Although the metaphor of the ear in the first lines of this poem makes an opening feint to define, clarify and categorize conscious awareness through comparison to sound, it is sound itself that from the first, multiplies uncertainties. This logical breakdown becomes the main drama of the second stanza. But even in the first stanza, Emily Dickinson strains logic at precisely the points where she seems to set it forth. The bald statement of fact in the first sentence, the determination of what’s “actual” in the second, the legalistic phrase, “That is admitted,” all fabricate certainty out of uncertain substances: spirit, sound, and the mysterious processes of their perception. The clause “That is admitted—Here—” introduces a same rhyme between “Hear” and “Here” which destabilizes the deictic “here.” Here hear? Hear here? It is in the ear where these sounds become indistinguishable from one another, where the semantic difference between here and hear becomes undiscernible. And so to be admitted into an ear entails entering a labyrinth where hearing is what is here, where sound embodies, makes expansively present, and brings together beings on the level of vibration. Sound is only one element of sound. When human or animal ears hear, they are picking up on just one range of vibrations. But the world is awash with a sea of soundwaves that exceed the audible. Attending to sound’s province above and below consciousness, the first stanza of Dickinson’s poem casts the imagination up into spiritual sensing, both in sound and beyond it, whereas the second stanza plumbs embodied hearing, the disjointed joints that run underneath awareness.

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<sup>48</sup> All Dickinson poems are cited with reference to editions by Johnson and Franklin. Images from Dickinson’s fascicles are from the Emily Dickinson Archive and from the Harvard University Library.

In “The Ontology of Vibrational Force,” Steve Goodman argues that considering sound as vibration frees it from phenomenological anthropocentrism, includes unknown communities of nonhuman participants in sonic experience, and decenters the dynamic between subject and object, since vibrations exceed the entities that produce them: “Vibrating entities are always out of phase with themselves” (71). In this chapter, I will explore what it means to consider Dickinson’s poetics as vibrational. Vibration locates sound within the body, or more precisely, it makes manifest the embodiment of sound. Waves of sound travel through the air, passing in and out of human and animal bodies, bodies of stone and wood and leaf. While these waves travel through us—the bodies both living and nonliving that populate the earth—we share a rhythm that is indescribable and unaccountable. Certainly it is perceived in different ways by each body. But nevertheless soundwaves connect us, like a shared heartbeat, a simultaneous if not coordinated breath. In this way, vibrations are the sound waves that effect hearing whether or not they are audible, as well as the body’s responsive reverberations to the vibrations passing through it. Thinking about sound as a series of waves—rather than a noise which is registered as such by the ear—asks us to consider sound as a palpable substance, neither solid nor liquid, rather than an abstraction to be assimilated into human reason. The level on which soundwaves connect us is below or beyond the threshold of rational thought. In this way the community that it fosters may be said to be ambient. Ambient: from the French *ambient* or Latin *ambient*, “going around.” Expansive, unlocatable to a stable center, ambient sound is constantly on the move, vibration that never rests.

In this chapter, vibrations include: 1) sound waves, 2) the body’s responsive vibrations to those sound waves, 3) Dickinson’s formal effects such as rhyme, rhythm, and pun, which make manifest the first and second points above, and 4) the ambient connectivity running between points 1, 2, 3, and 4. In this chapter, I will consider the ways in which Dickinson’s vibrational poetics reframe an understanding of her formal effects. Poetic repetition—the beat or pulse of rhyme, the semantic shift of puns, the thump of rhythm—becomes unsettling rather than reaffirming. Sound is a moving body that moves through other bodies and makes them move. We can hear both the transitive and intransitive senses of the verb. Vibration is expansive and ever-opening. It exists between rather than in, or at. Vibration asks us to think again about what we know of containment, and it asks us to think again: repetitive, echoic, musical and intolerably noiselike, vibration returns the same sounds upon themselves, and in this way it foregrounds poetry’s noise, it shows how formal poetic qualities can be re-read as disparate and (paradoxically) unformed parts. Vibration demands an awareness of sound as a series of waves, rather than a coherent sentence with logical meaning.



Indeed, my project here is one of embodying, of following Dickinson, as she would say, “down, down, in the terrestrial.” I trace the ultimately unaccountable and uncountable ways the body makes thought happen in the world. Alongside Dickinson’s physicalized formal effects such as rhyme and repetition, I will consider the importance of figuration, focusing especially on synaesthetic examples in which certain organs and body parts work in excess of their apparent practical function: ears speak in these pages, and lungs think. The speaking ear thus becomes a way for Dickinson to imagine a poem as an organ or body or figure of simultaneous receptivity and excess. In my reading, figuration draws out the two senses of the word “figure”: first, figure as a rhetorical feature that includes figures of speech and metaphor; and second, figure as a physical body. Figuration in this chapter is connected to vibration for the way it physicalizes abstraction. The speaking ear makes an organ of receptivity also an instrument of speech, which demonstrates how the body and its parts work in unexpected, unpredictable ways. My readings will begin with focused readings of Dickinson’s poetry, then of her letters, and then will step back to look again at her poetry. Moving between and among writings, hearing sounds that sound again, the shape of this chapter too is vibrational.

Dickinson’s same rhyme between “hear” and “here” vibrates insofar as it prompts the reader to dart back and forth between two possible meanings which sound the same, like strings reverberating in space in order to emit one note. Simultaneous and skewed. Rhyme initiates this effect in a subdued sense; a rhyming sound recalls and sounds again its other iterations across the poem, remembers the sounds before, anticipates the sounds to come. But same rhyme accentuates that effect. In addition to creating a vibration across the time of the stanza, from rhyme to rhyme, like the thump of a bass, same rhyme makes each word twang in (and out of) itself. “Hear” and “here” are again revealed to be puns. And the particular word choice is poignant. When we reach the fourth line of the first stanza and the deictic “here,” the focused presence of this pointing becomes a site of tension. At the locating word *here*, what we “hear” prompts us to jump back *there*, to the word “hear.” The aural reminder that we hear both enlivens the here, and asks us to consider “here” as expansive, multiple. And so the Conscious Ear attains a brilliancy, a form of hyperrealism, in which by returning and returning to the same sounds in different words, awareness opens up, intensifies, expands.

The synesthesia implied by the light-charged word “brilliancy” in the context of hearing seems suited to Dickinson in general, this poem in particular. By comparing spiritual consciousness to listening in the opening line, Dickinson draws different forms of perception close, opens to their overlapping. Vibrational poetics extend out into

realms of sound beyond sound. The two compared elements of metaphor do not remain distinct from one another, but rather trade qualities, not only according to the logic of the comparison—the Spirit is like the Conscious Ear insofar as both attend, both lean into the air to perceive spiritual strains, whether of music or of something less palpable than that—but also in ways more complicated, less immediate. We may never comprehend all of the ways in which the Spirit is like the Conscious Ear, but we may catch, at unforeseen moments, and in ways resistant to description, a spiritual apprehension through sound, or a sound inside stillness.

The synaesthesia between spiritual sensing and physical perception that Dickinson anticipates through her opening metaphor becomes apparent later in the stanza, when verbs of perception begin to interchange with one another. “We actually Hear/ When We inspect,” she writes, asserting the *actual* nature of listening via inspecting, a verb which, although its etymology relates to vision, here seems mainly to be functioning as a verb to describe perceptual attentiveness more generally. Then, in the same line, she jolts, across a dash, back to sound: “—that’s audible—,” to complete a synaesthetic involution, carrying sound to sight to attention back to sound. But synaesthesia could also be understood metaphorically as a way to understand the pun on hear/here. When the same sound means two ways, the sense of hearing becomes a site where different meanings run together. Synaesthesia mingles the body’s senses, and pun mingles the senses of words.

But if synaesthesia performs how one organ of sense can perceive what another is expected to do, it can also work to inverse effect by reminding us that organs conventionally reduced to functioning in one way—for example, that the ear is simply for hearing—need not be so limited. Spiritual listening may glory in silence as much as sound, and in this way the ear might be understood as a receptacle for sound’s absence as much as its presence. Further, the inner ear in vertebrates—humans, parrots, frogs, dogs, sardines, etc.—does not only listen; it also balances. Wrapped into the curling architecture known as the bony labyrinth are the cochlea, which hears, and the vestibular system, which balances.

To say that the Spirit is the Conscious Ear does not isolate the ear’s listening, but expands the ways the ear can work. This capacious, expansive signification opens another meaning for the dense word “Here” in the fourth line of the first stanza: in addition to vibrating across the second and fourth line, “here” also thrums with the sounds of the whole poem. It could point *here*, to the poem itself, referring both to the way in which Dickinson’s comparison is “admitted” into the logic of the stanza, and to the way sound permeates a physical ear. In this way, the word “here” turns the poem itself into an ear, which admits sounds as it accumulates words. The poem, like the ear, is a body for sound, a body of sound. Vibrational poetics are necessarily permeable, conducting an interpenetration between senses and sounds. But if the poem becomes an ear, then once again the action that this organ performs is necessarily complicated, for

the poem *speaks*. Dickinson figures a speaking ear, an organ of receptivity with diverse capacity for sounding and sensing, and strange powers of speech.

## 2. "a smaller Ear"

Now that the ear of the first stanza is acting in illogical, even seemingly contradictory ways, let's turn to the second stanza, where the forces of logic dissolve.<sup>49</sup> If the spirit is the conscious ear, what is the unconscious ear? The poem seems to imply the question, although it does not pose it directly. That the poem is divided into two stanzas, that the first stanza presents one comparison, and that the second begins with the turn, "For other Services—as Sound—," all strengthen this implication. But whereas the first stanza explores spiritual listening, the second turns to the hearing of the body. Dickinson performs unconsciousness strikingly through a breakdown of grammatical certainty, while images take on a dreamlike, fantastical character. The image of a smaller Ear (smaller than what? than the Conscious Ear? this is the first we've heard about the size of any ears, whether spiritual or physical) hanging (such an oddly precarious verb evokes a detachable organ hung as temporarily as a coat on a hook) on the outside of a Castle (a fairytale metaphor for a body, reminiscent of old romance, as well as to the seventeenth-century trope of the body as a castle with five portals for the five senses)—this is, to say the least, a bizarre picture.

In a poem about expansive forms of hearing, this second stanza is where we really encounter noise. Friedrich Kittler makes the point in "Gramophone" that the invention of the phonograph subverted the biases of literature and music by recording not just beloved voices or pleasing music, but *all* sounds: "The phonograph does not hear as do ears that have been trained immediately to filter voices, words, and sounds out of noise; it registers acoustic events as such" (235). In this way, what Kittler calls "articulatedness" becomes one noise among other noises. This formulation is in slight contrast with the way Kittler frames it—that articulatedness is an "exception in a spectrum of noise." I would argue that in fact, what the phonograph reveals is that the voice is simply another noise.<sup>50</sup> The stanza's grammatical breakdown does not describe

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<sup>49</sup> As Shira Wolosky writes in "Emily Dickinson: Being in the Body": "the text becomes more recalcitrant and opaque the longer one works with it. This textual obduracy is, in many ways, in itself a central Dickinsonian subject" (130).

<sup>50</sup> It is beyond the scope of this chapter to extend this argument into Dickinson's social context, although I think that this could be done. For a critique of the mythologization of Dickinson as an isolated genius, see Paula Bernat Bennett's "Emily Dickinson and Her American Women Poet Peers." Bennett locates Dickinson within a complex of contemporary women writers by comparing the different ways that all of these writers engage with images of sewing, spinning, weaving, and knitting. Ultimately, the effect of Bennett's article is still to separate Dickinson from her contemporaries, since she argues that Dickinson rejects the poetry of her American women poet peers, even though she uses some similar imagery.

noise as much as it performs it; the lines themselves sound out in excess of a message that might be reduced to clear signification. Subjects and objects refuse to maintain proper grammatical relationships. The subject of the verb “Contain” (7) appears to be “Ear” (6), but if this were true, one would expect “Contains.” Similarly, the expected subject of the final word “Hear” (8) is “other” (8), but their numbers jar; unless it is imperative, it should read “Hears.” While it is conceivable that “Services” govern “Contain,” that still does not explain the conflict between “other” and “Hear” in the final line. Dreamlike, objects slip out of the grasp of agents.

Michel Chion defines three types of listening: causal listening, semantic listening, and reduced listening. Causal listening, the most common, “consists of listening to a sound in order to gather information about its cause (or source)” (“The Three Listening Modes” 48). Semantic listening “refers to a code or a language to interpret a message” (50), like spoken language or Morse code. Reduced listening “focuses on the traits of the sound itself, independent of its cause and of its meaning” (50). If Dickinson were identifying a mode of listening it would be none of these. What mode of listening attends to sounds not in the world but in the spirit? In dreams or in memories? What she performs in this poem is something closer to what Chion mentions later in “The Three Listening Modes,” in passing: “There is always something about sound that overwhelms us and surprises us no matter what—especially when we refuse to lend it our conscious attention; and thus sound interferes with our perception, affects it” (53). Hearing is “omnidirectional”; the listener is utterly enfolded in sound even as beings across hierarchy all hear and sound together. But whereas Chion wants to fight against those ways in which sound “interferes with our perception” because he objects to sound’s potential to be a form of manipulation, Dickinson, in contrast, shows how sound’s interference confounds the subject’s perceived dominance over its sensory landscape. “Its sensory landscape” is a phrase which, in Dickinson’s upended grammar, would not occur. Relations of possession and governance suddenly slide both ways, and the tricky “its” might unexpectedly point backwards as well as forwards.

Grammar’s conscious logic has no power in this stanza, but dreamlogic—omnidirectional, capricious, polysemous—reigns.<sup>51</sup> Whereas grammar helps to hold meaning in place by maintaining stable relationships between subjects, objects, verbs, and modifiers, no such stability exists in the second stanza of this poem. What is the grammar of unconscious hearing? When multiple grammars coexist in lines that never fully resolve themselves into certainty, all of the meanings remain suspended in potential, never realized, but never discarded. Sharon Cameron has theorized the

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<sup>51</sup> As Wendy Barker writes in “Emily Dickinson and poetic strategy,” “Soporific, these prosy winds seduce the poet into falling asleep, into losing her wakefulness, her consciousness” (77). Whereas Barker’s interpretations of prose, sleep, and loss of consciousness are entirely negative, my reading of these states dwells on their generative power.

implications of choosing not choosing in Dickinson's fascicles, "through the continuously renegotiated connections of part to whole" (159), considering the relation between variant and poem, between different poems, within and across fascicles, as well as within individual lyrics. Cameron writes that not choosing:

may indeed be one of the disappointments of a certain way of reading them [the fascicles], or of a nostalgia for a certain kind of coherence. It may be why most assessments of the fascicles have declared them arbitrary. The longing for coherence assumes that the whole explains the part. It likewise assumes that what the whole "is" can be recognized. In distinction to these conceptions, it is the genius of this poetry, or you could say its perversity, to decline—and in complex terms—precisely such assumptions. (178)

The fascicle version of the poem (see figure 1) reveals variations which expand the many meanings of meanings which already abound. Dickinson already maintains—not coordinates, for the meanings do not necessarily reinforce one another in any organized way—extravagantly expanding meanings in this poem, as in almost all of her others. I want to dwell in possibility—in the many omnidirectional possibilities of these lines; I want to follow them in their splaying directions. It is important to me to emphasize—and this does not at all counter Cameron's overarching argument—that the importance of not choosing is already central in Dickinson's poetry, whether or not the added complication of the variants comes into play. Indeed, in this chapter I will focus on the indeterminacy that dances in the poem proper, rather than going into extended analysis of the variants.

The Spirit is the Conscious  
 Ear.  
 We actually Hear  
 When we inspect - that's  
 Auditing.  
 That is admitted - here -  
 For other <sup>+</sup> Services - as Sound -  
 then hangs a <sup>+</sup> smaller Ear  
 Outside the <sup>+</sup> Castle - that  
<sup>+</sup> Contains -  
 The Other - Only - Hear -  
 + Purposes + Minor + Centre -  
 City + Present -

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Figure 1. Emily Dickinson, *Poems: Packet XXII, Fascicle 35*, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Emily Dickinson Archive, [www.edickinson.org](http://www.edickinson.org).

“For other Services—as Sound—/ There hangs a smaller Ear[.]” This could mean *for other Services that are just as Sound, there hangs a smaller ear*. It could also mean *for other Services, such as Sound, there hangs a smaller Ear*. In the first possibility, the speaker would be suggesting that “other Services” are as valuable as the forms of attentiveness we had been considering in the first stanza. This move towards embodying sound, locating listening in a body, suggests that physical “Sound” might be as “Sound” as spiritual attentiveness. This insistence both honors the body, and honors the spirit which is linked to the body via metaphor. In the second possibility, the speaker would be suggesting that “Sound” is an example of “other Services.” What other services? Presumably, these are services “other” to spiritual listening. So while the most ready binary pair would contrast the body to the spirit, other others remain potential. Perhaps it’s devilish listening which contrasts with spiritual listening, a form of re-sounding which multiplies meanings, amplifies uncertainties, makes many realities coexist.<sup>52</sup> Again, Dickinson makes the word “Sound” the center of the tangle. There is a light irony that sound isn’t sound, isn’t stable here. Rather, sound vibrates in and out of itself. It’s impossible to decide whether “Sound” in this stanza is a noun or an adjective. The connective words which would pin down meaning would occur, if they occurred, where instead we find dashes. We encounter, instead of singularity of reference, a charged pause which holds weight: we encounter rhythm itself. Noiselike, riffing in sound and on the word sound, these lines mean two things at once.

The final lines contain a similar indeterminacy: “There hangs a smaller Ear/ Outside the Castle—that Contain—/ The other—only—Hear—.” We might hear this as 1) *a smaller Ear hangs Outside the Castle, and this ear Contains, whereas the other ears only Hear*, or 2) *a smaller Ear hangs Outside the Castle, and this ear Contains the other*, or 3) *a smaller Ear hangs Outside the Castle, and this Castle Contains the other*. All of these three are dependent again, demonstrating refracted degrees of mutual implication, on which of the readings we take from the line before. The first version leaves hanging the sense of the verb “Contains.” Contains what or how or why? The action takes place, but the walls of this containment are left open. The second version offers the strange possibility that the ear contains the other. The ear has no lid but opens, always open. What would

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<sup>52</sup> Richard Cullen Rath describes how Catholic churches in Europe were designed to reflect sound, so that the priest’s voice, directed away from the congregation, would reach the listeners first as echo. Already in Latin, the priest’s words would redound—Rath writes—“echo upon echo upon echo” (132) He says, “While the medieval chancel is often negatively construed as an impediment to vision and acoustic clarity separating priest from congregants, it can also be considered a beautifully executed, very large musical instrument, somewhat like the body of a lute” (131). He contrasts this acoustic design with early American churches, which were designed for egalitarianism and its clarity. The devil hides in echoes and distorted sounds, sounds originating from the priest himself.

it mean to contain the other? Maybe containing the other is exactly what has made this poem so strange; maybe the other, which is unknowable, has introduced this indeterminacy that refuses certainty. And indeed, nothing is contained—Dickinson gestures towards containment, then releases parts of speech into multiple relations. Her containment always already takes place “Outside the Castle,” in the marginal space kept outside. In this way, the smaller Ear seems already aligned with the forces of “The other.” The smaller ear contains the other, and the other contains the smaller ear. The two receptacles and inhabitants of the outside enter and re-enter one another, in the way that ambient sound populates space. To contain the other necessitates a mode of containment which is recessive, which does not assimilate the other into the same. The maximalist version of this reading is the final one, in which the castle contains the other. In this version, the castle itself, rather than just the ear, becomes the shadowy space through which otherness moves.

But perhaps these two spaces, the castle and the ear, are closer than that—perhaps the castle is the labyrinth of the inner ear, and containment refers to the action of listening: loose, open, expansive and expanding. Listening brings the other in and maintains the mutuality of that dwelling. The word “contain” comes from the Latin words *con* (altogether) and *tenere* (to hold). Permeable to the flux of bodies in bodies, the ear as container makes space for a physical togetherness which refuses overarching mastery. Again, Dickinson makes the word “Hear” into a multiplying pun. The words “only—Hear—” might say that the action of the other ear is merely to hear (in a reductive sense), or is limited only to hearing (in a restrictive sense). But these words also play on the homonym “here,” which is already active elsewhere in the poem, as we have seen. In this sense, they could suggest that the containment only takes place here. Finally, they could be read as injunction: only hear. Although I will not dwell on the implications of Dickinson’s variants for this poem, her possible substitution of “minor Ear” for “smaller Ear” does suggest a musical idiom of major and minor scales, while the possible substitution of “that present” for “that Contain” evokes a temporal immediacy which might be construed to bear similarly musical undertones. Considering all of these possibilities in all of their possible combinations ricochets, as Dickinson might say, out of sound.

### 3. “rooted in the labyrinths”

For Dickinson, the physical ear and its proximity to unconsciousness opens grammar up to multiple possibilities. Consciousness chooses a version, identifies sounds by bringing them into awareness. But the unconscious does not achieve mastery over fragments or resolve disparate elements into a whole. In this way, paradoxically, the body rather than the mind has access to imaginative play: an expansive, ever-moving, playful permeability to the world around. For the ear of the body remains open, if not



aware, during unconscious states such as sleep and death. If the body's powers in this poem lie in the zone of unconsciousness, this places a special emphasis on passivity: the unaware body, whether it is sleeping or otherwise abstracted, is passive, motionless, or automatic. But consciousness and unconsciousness are linked energies for Dickinson. The unconscious body as described within a poem is still mediated by consciousness. Consciousness reaches out beyond itself into unconsciousness, but chaos fills intentionality with doubt. In this way it feels more accurate to extend the concept of vibrational poetics to the fluctuation between consciousness and unconsciousness in poem 733, as well as in Dickinson's poetics more broadly. It is the sounding, vibrating body, in all its material fleshliness, that thinks.

Dickinson's vibrational poetics question via the body: through sensory exploration, rhythmic return, a shuttling between doubt and palpable, embodied feeling. In poem 470, Dickinson's speaker seems at once alive and dead, embodied and abstracted: "I am alive—I guess—" (1). This dubiously affirming guesswork is repeated through seven quatrains that each determine that the speaker remains alive because of various physical proofs: she holds a bouquet of morning glories, her pink fingers feel heat, her breath fogs a glass. Each of these pieces of evidence prove embodiment while at the same time suggesting that life itself is in question. The body guesses by breathing, asks by feeling, and questions by rhythmically returning and returning to sensation.<sup>53</sup> If existence's proof lies in the body, what is the difference between the living person and the corpse? One of the implications of this startling question is a decentering of agential human authority. In the same poem, the speaker continues:

I am alive—because  
 I am not in a Room—  
 The Parlor—Commonly—it is—  
 So Visitors may come—

And lean—and view it sidewise—  
 And add "How cold—it grew" —  
 And "Was it conscious—when it stepped  
 In Immortality?"

This strange question—whether the corpse was conscious when it died—sustains categories of awareness as spaces between which the body vibrates. We imagine the conscious body becoming unconscious, but an unconsciousness illuminated as

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<sup>53</sup> As Susan Howe writes gorgeously about rhythm and its embodied pacing in *My Emily Dickinson*, "Dashes drew liberty of interruption inside the structure of each poem. Hush of hesitation for breath and for breathing" (23).

“Immortality,” and in this way perhaps actually a heightened consciousness. The question also marks a vocal jolt into quoted speech, and a speech moreover that refers to the speaker, through a negative fantasy which is only imagined in order to be rejected, as an *it*. In this way, through framed layers of remove, closeness, embodied fantasy, and impossibly receding alienation, the speaker passes in and out of her body. And then again, of course, we double back: “I am alive,” she affirms, “because/ I am *not* in a Room”? This doesn’t sound very alive at all. Layered on top of these affirmations is a screen of doubt, and we realize that although this might, at face value, be a poem about being alive, about weighing what proofs and feelings make up life, it might just as easily be a poem about being dead, about weighing those bare proofs and finding them lacking. The body perceives, in so many of Dickinson’s poems, from within the confines of cold flesh beyond consciousness. The final stanza repeats ambivalent affirmations:

How good — to be alive!  
 How infinite — to be  
 Alive — two-fold — The Birth I had —  
 And this — besides, in — Thee!

What constitutes this second consciousness is unclear. There has been no addressee until the cavalier turn in the last line, which delivers the poem over to a second person while in the same breath falling silent. And alongside the repeated assurance that the speaker relishes being alive, we also see this dubious living doubled with “infinite” being at the same time, a word which sounds dangerously near to the “Immortality” above, a euphemism for death. The second birth could mark any number of thresholds: religious reawakening, submission to love, or passing into death. All of these possibilities necessarily remain possible, omnidirectional. What is certain is the fact of repetition itself. Sound doubles back, and “two-fold,” echoes again.

We see this pattern often in poems which, in the same way, establish a structure of physicalized questioning through focused sensing. Poem F357 (1862) 351 is one stunning example. It begins:

I felt my life with both my hands  
 To see if it was there —  
 I held my spirit to the Glass,  
 To prove it possibler —

The speaker, incredulous that life should exist without the feeling of life, wrenches abstract qualities into the physical realm, as though by dwelling on each with intensity, she could force a sense of liveliness. She feels her life with her hands, holds her spirit

against glass, turns Being itself around in scrutiny. It is almost as though this speaker pulls her spirit down into her body, subjects it to physical tests. This exaggerated embodying places special weight on sound. The poem continues:

I turned my Being round and round  
And paused at every pound  
To ask the Owner's name—  
For doubt, that I should know the sound—

Asking a name, in this context, twins sound and body. The action of asking is not necessarily vocalized; we do not have any mention of speech itself. Rather, the speaker turns her Being around in order to ask its Owner's name. Who is the Owner of a being? Although the most immediate sense of these lines is that the speaker asks herself her own name, the Owner might also be God. This reading supports the intense atmosphere of alienation, and gives an agnostic resonance to the "doubt" that we see in line 8. Turning a being round and round evokes an image of dance, a body twirling. At the same time, it refers to introspection, an inward, reflective turning which plays on the etymology of the word conversation, "to turn around together." It is impossible to tell, in this doubling, whether the turning refers to dancing or to thinking. In the same way, "every pound" might refer to Being's weight, which the speaker weighs with care—or to the thumping, rhythmical sound of turning. That "pound" rhymes with "round and round," and itself embodies rhythm by amplifying a repeated rhyme, strengthens this possibility. Here we hear sound's weight, the heaviness of the beat, the body of rhythm.<sup>54</sup> For Dickinson, this heaviness does not connote surety, but rather a resonant questioning. Even while the speaker comes down hard on another rhyme, to "know the sound" at once rings out loud, and repeats the sense of doubt. Each stanza in this poem has a different rhyme scheme, as though performing an asking and asking again, a constantly various sounding-out.

For Adriana Cavarero, the voice is stubbornly and importantly rooted in the body—in the touch of the tongue against teeth, the warmth of the throat, the rasp of vibrating vocal cords. In *For More than One Voice*, Cavarero gorgeously and rigorously traces what she calls the devocalization of logos, a process which starts, she argues, with Plato, and continues throughout much of Western thought. Logos has come to be confused with language as a system of signification. Its etymology, which derives from the ancient Greek verb *legein* and means "speaking," "gathering," "binding," "joining,"

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<sup>54</sup> Roland Barthes's idea of the "grain of the voice" roots the voice in its physical individuality. He defines this term variously as "the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message)" ("The Grain of the Voice" 507), the "sung writing of language" (507), and "the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs" (509).

already shifts the focus away from the acoustic aspect of speaking, to the abstract activity of joining words together (34). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle describes logos as *phone semantike*, or signifying voice. Aristotle emphasizes that man is the only creature for whom the voice is a meaningful sound, *semantike*, and for other animals the voice is simply a cry, a noise. This yoking of sound and meaning blurs the difference between speech and understanding. Cavarero attributes the broadness of the word *phone* in the Greek philosophical language—which means both “sound” and “voice,” both human speech and inarticulate cry—to this muting effect (178). She pushes back against theorists for whom the human voice is merely a sound among other noises. For Cavarero, the essential point is not to revocalize logos, but rather to recuperate the sonority of speech, a resonance which is utterly unique to the human throat, to the individual identity from whom it issues. What I want to draw on in Cavarero is the way she hears the voice of sound—the rasping embodied noise within speech. But whereas Cavarero understands the capacious multiplicity in the word *phone* as a “strange poverty” (178), even an “acoustic pathology” (178), and takes issue with the fact that “the mouth, the living body are aligned with other sources of sonorous emission” (178), I am arguing, in contrast, for exactly this kind of alignment. Cavarero writes:

The soprano who sings “like a nightingale” is, in this sense, a misplaced metaphor. As in a musical instrument, in the animal voice, the sound does not challenge speech because it does not carry speech in itself. In human song, however, the voice carries speech. Even when it renders speech incomprehensible or breaks down its syllabic texture, the voice still carries speech and recognizes in it its essential destination. The *phone* is, even when it negates the semantic in its sonorous ocean, nevertheless, *semantike*. Speech, no matter how frustrated by song its semantic valence may be, nevertheless continues to be what song is destined toward. (127)

When it comes to human noise, to the incomprehensible expansiveness in song, Cavarero insists on the generosity of the semantic. Meaning inheres even in what exceeds meaning—at least when the signifying voice is human. But it is a strange refusal for her to deny the same rich possibilities inside animal song, inanimate song, in the many thousands and millions of voices which sound out inhuman tones. Just because human understanding does not have access to whatever meaning might inhere in a nightingale’s song, just because human ears cannot access any signifying order in the creaks and whistles and clangs that populate the air, does not necessarily mean that those sounds do not signify to inhuman ears—or even simply signify in themselves, without being “to” anything at all. What I want to emphasize in the vibrational is its expansiveness, the way it opens the possibility of meaning, whether understood or beyond understanding.

The possibilities within Cavarero's readings are richer than her insistence on a strictly humanist application would allow. Cavarero argues that Plato tells the story of Marsyas in order to stop his own ears from the seductive aural power of Socratic speech, and thereby devocalize logos. Marsyas is the vain satyr who challenges the gods by contending that the flute is superior to string instruments. Apollo proves him wrong, and as punishment, flays him alive. Cavarero reads the flute as an extension of the mouth, which interferes and confuses itself with voice: "In other words, the flute lets itself, dangerously, represent the *phone* in the double sense of the term: voice and sound. Whoever plays it renounces speech and evokes a world in which the acoustic sphere and expressions of corporeality predominate" (69). Cavarero acknowledges the danger of the flute without granting the full extent of its power. For it is precisely the fact that this powerful and unearthly voice breaks from the inanimate reed—the instrument which becomes hybrid with the human body and extends from the mouth, blurs with language, and threatens the gods—that is the frightening part of the story. The flute represents the voice and sound of a world that intersects with the human mouth, but which is not limited to it: the flute's voice is both human and extra-human at the same time. Human voice becomes more than itself by means of an object whose power can be channeled but not controlled. The anecdote of Marsyas, flayed alive, allows Plato to justify the transformation of Socratic speech into Plato's metaphysical logos, for the flaying of the ugly exterior becomes an analogy for the divine meaning that inheres inside signification, the nut inside the shell, and by extension the conceptualization of logos (72). This is the same argument that Dickinson puts forward in the first stanza of poem J733, Fr718: "The Spirit is the Conscious Ear." Listening for the meaning within the sound, consciousness searches for what is translatable within the acoustic signifier. This is the realm of spiritual abstraction, of language as a system of signs. What sounds the body admits are more obscure, less reducible to abstraction and generalization.<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, Dickinson's trope of the thinking body is one that Cavarero intuits by recounting the suggestive, if ultimately erroneous, work of the now mostly discredited philologist R. B. Onians. In *The Origins of European Thought About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*, Onians suggests that in the most ancient phase of many cultures, it was believed that thought took place in the lungs (Cavarero 62). Before metaphysics shifted the work of thought to the brain, Greeks believed that the *phrenes* (lungs) contained an ethereal substance called *thumos*, or spirit, which was an exhalation of the blood. Cavarero writes: "The affinity between thought and speech—or, better, the derivation of the first from the second—situates the mind and the intellectual activities in the respiratory apparatus and in the organs of phonation. It is,

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<sup>55</sup> My reading is in contrast to Jacques Derrida in "The Voice that Keeps Silence," where he argues that "The voice is the being which is present to itself in the form of universality, as consciousness; the voice is consciousness" (498).

so to speak, the *phone* that decides the physiology of thought" (63). The ancients, moreover, believed that the ears were connected both to the mouth and to the lungs, creating a circuit between speaking, thinking, and listening. The thinking lungs, body parts which take part, unruly, in actions from which they are apparently excluded, are in the same family of misfits as Dickinson's speaking ears.

When Cavarero writes that "Speaking, which is first of all a labor of phonation, is rooted in the labyrinths of the body for modern science as well" (65, my emphasis), her metaphor of the labyrinth evokes the scientific term for the inner ear, which, as we have seen, contributes to the expansiveness of Dickinson's metaphor of the castle. In this way, even figuration does not only lead out to abstraction, but also turns back to the physical substance of the body itself. It both proliferates imaginative possibilities via metaphor and remains fixed in the physical. It describes an action in which the body performs abstraction, makes thought. Cavarero points out how speech itself, for the human animal, involves using parts of the body improperly. She cites an ear, nose, and throat specialist, who says that although the body has a digestive apparatus and a respiratory apparatus, there is no linguistic apparatus (65). We speak by using the throat and the tongue, the teeth and the lungs, to do things which are in excess of their practical function. Following this logic, speech is always awry from strict usefulness. Thus when Cavarero says that speaking is rooted in the labyrinths of the body, the trope of the speaking ear is all the more important. She means that speaking asks the body to work in contorted ways, for a tongue to turn, like a mysteriously shifting stone wall, and press against the teeth. The labyrinths of the body expand the possible actions available to the throat and lungs: puzzle-like, they expand and open, ever curling inwards. Cavarero's phrase, the labyrinths of the body, also very simply refers to the ear. If speaking is rooted in the labyrinths of the body, this means *both* that speaking expands the body's physical functions, *and* that the ear is bound up mysteriously with the action of speech. Cavarero's labyrinth has an actual side (the inner ear), and a fanciful side as well (a metaphor suggesting the body's complexity). A figure within a figure, itself the term is labyrinthine.

In the thinking body, figuration does important work, and enlivens both senses of the word "figure." For the process of figuration is a move toward abstraction which turns back to the physical. A metaphor creates a concept by imagining another body and placing it alongside for comparison. Contrary to the work of abstraction, which spins out a concept into generalization, figuration is stubbornly physical. The figure resonates with irreducible meanings, which cannot be paraphrased or generalized, but which reside in the fullness of conceptual embodiment. A figure cannot be described, but must be spoken in its entirety. There would be no substance to the sentence that paraphrased Cavarero's rich metaphor of the labyrinths of the body. Cavarero's conceptual work takes place inside the abundance of the labyrinth's meaning. For us to return to that conceptual work requires that we repeat the whole structure, retrace the

labyrinth's edifice: the labyrinth of the body, we say again, the labyrinth of the body. That is to say, the complexity of figuration exceeds paraphrase. And so figuration both enacts a paradoxically embodied abstraction, exemplifies the body thinking, and at the same time performs vibrational poetics. It sounds again. "We actually Hear/ When We inspect," writes Dickinson. The process of thought, the careful inspection that turns being round and round, involves *actual* hearing, the body itself.

#### 4. "think of the hills and the dales"

If the lungs can breathe thought and the ears can make speech, space opens in the physical world for the body to exceed itself in proliferating actions. The body means more than meaning gives it, for reason's parsimoniousness may delimit but it cannot contain. Materialist approaches are particularly important in the tradition of Dickinson criticism, partially because, as Virginia Jackson puts it, "there is so little left of her" (10). Without a clear critical understanding of how to interpret Dickinson's fascicles, letters, fragments of writing on envelope scraps and receipts, thank-you notes, preserved flowers and crickets and bits of string and tiny nightingales clipped from *The New England Primer*, a wide range of understandings offer varying interpretive perspectives. Dickinson criticism exemplifies an interpretive trend which Jackson terms "lyricization." According to Jackson, this coercive style of reading, made dominant in the academic institution by New Criticism, ignores the particularity of a poet's context or probable intentions, in favor of flattening different forms of writing into what has become a catch-all term: "lyric." Jackson writes: "From the mid-nineteenth through the beginning of the twenty-first century, to be lyric is to be read as lyric—and to be read as a lyric is to be printed and framed as a lyric" (6). The time period, Jackson points out, in which Dickinson's writing was collected and circulated as poetry, coincides with the emergence of the lyric genre. And Dickinson's writing—indeterminate both semantically, in its omnidirectional syntax and loose grammar, and materially, in its unpublished status which withholds any definite generic framework—has leant itself to lyric reading with particular ease. Jackson pushes back against a longstanding tendency, inaugurated by influential misreadings of John Stuart Mill's 1833 essay on poetry, to understand the lyric as unmediated. Mill famously writes:

eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. (57)

Against readings that posit the lyric as isolated from poetic intentions, Jackson advocates for an understanding of genre that attends to historical complexity. She summarizes:

I have wanted to find a way into various lyric genres (songs, notes, letters, lists, postscripts, elegies, jokes, ads, dead crickets, valentines, stamps, Poetess verse, pressed flowers, printed paper cut-out birds) as alternatives to a singular idea of the lyric, or to an idea of the lyric as singular, or to poetry as we now tend to understand it. To call such a miscellany either a list of genres or to call those genres lyric is to suggest how capacious retrospective lyric reading can be, and also to suggest the messiness that I would like to attach to what are often purified terms, to suggest that genres themselves might be read as historical modes of language power. (235)

Rather than an idealized utterance of a solitary speaker who exists outside of history or material contingency, what comes to be absorbed into the monolithic category of lyric was in fact was often a minor, topical, daily, transient subgenre.

Although Jackson's emphasis on the elided messiness of history is an important reminder to attend to the contextual particularity of each piece of writing and to avoid categorical generalizations, I want to resist the way in which an overemphasis on the archive—especially when it comes to Dickinson—can have exclusionary ramifications. In "The Emily Dickinson Wars," Betsy Erkkila argues that the conflict over Dickinson's manuscripts is a property dispute signifying the "historically contingent relation between marketplace notions of individualism and private property and the emergence of modern notions of poetic genius, the author, and the work as forms of intellectual property" (14). She points out the irony that the Dickinson manuscripts are now owned by Amherst and Harvard, and rigorously policed by these institutions, while they would have been public domain by now had they been published during Dickinson's lifetime. In my own research for this chapter, I relied on the willingness of graduate student colleagues at Harvard to lend me their library access (or consent to my stealing of it, depending on the reading), which grants them exclusive access to view digitized images of Dickinson's letters.<sup>56</sup> By insisting on a certain "correct" way of reading Dickinson which is informed by access to manuscripts protected by elite academic institutions, Jackson's objection to lyric reading risks protecting Dickinson from readers who are not admitted into the academic club.

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<sup>56</sup> The poems are available publicly online, but the letters require a Harvard login. My research for this chapter took place at the University of California, Berkeley, itself an institution by no means innocent of the charges of exclusivity and privatization of intellectual commons.



Lyric reading in fact lends itself to a generous readerly promiscuity. The fact that Dickinson's work resists categorization offers us an opportunity to consider the categorization of that work less as a fixed edifice than as a vibrating body. Sounds cohere and disperse, meanings collect and fall apart, and lyric reading teaches a mode of understanding that destabilizes authority, that puts certainty out of phase with itself. As Daniel Benjamin writes in a chapter entitled "Lyric Theory in Apposition," turning away too quickly from lyric as a reading practice ignores the possible benefits of lyricization, along with the chance, which he puts in explicitly sonic terms, "to hear lyric's untimely echo, not fix it to its moment" (7). Lyric reading in fact offers the possibility for sound to spill out beyond fixed categories, reaching ears and environs from askance: from ears that speak, labyrinths that echo, lungs that think. Benjamin writes, "Lyrical readings create an imagined adjacency of listeners to singer, spreading out a soliloquy until it no longer sings only to itself" (9).

In Jackson's reading of an early letter from Dickinson to Susan Gilbert, written about February 1852, she emphasizes that, contrary to a lyrical reading which would take the "I" in the letter as a speaker or a persona, and the "you" as an expansive lyric addressee, Dickinson has a very specific addressee in mind.<sup>57</sup> The "you" is not just anyone, but Susan and Susan only. Although it is not a matter for debate whether or not the letter is addressed to Susan, or whether the "you" is particular rather than general, Jackson's exclusionary argument again privileges a certain power dynamic in which speech retains a privatizing authorial limitation, at the expense of more expansive communities who might hear, outside or beyond of intention. In fact, the text of Dickinson's letter itself explicitly resists this privatizing impulse. Dickinson writes:

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<sup>57</sup> Martha Nell Smith in "Susan and Emily Dickinson: Their lives, in Letters," argues that Dickinson's relationship with Susan Dickinson was the deepest and most intimate of her life, and that this fact has been systematically obscured and minimized for a variety of reasons, both during Dickinson's lifetime, and after her death. It's important that "Emily sent Susan substantially more writings than were addressed to any other person (more than twice the number sent to her next most frequently addressed correspondent, Thomas Wentworth Higginson), and these nearly 500 writings constitute one of two major corpora that Dickinson bequeathed to the world at her death (the other being the more than 800 poems in the fascicles)" (52). The way Dickinson corresponded with Susan differed materially from the way she corresponded with others. Whereas she wrote to others in ink, she wrote to Susan in pencil; she sent Susan early drafts of her poems, and revised her poems according to Susan's suggestions; she wrote Susan letters on different sized paper, scraps, and receipts, whereas she wrote to others on formal, gilt-edged paper. In the writings to Austin, someone has tried to censor affectionate expressions by Emily to and about Susan (53). Even Susan destroyed correspondence which she said was "too personal and adulatory ever to be printed" (54). Smith lays out the interest that Mabel Loomis Todd, Austin Dickinson's mistress, would have had in minimizing the importance of Dickinson's relationship with Susan. In Todd's volume, she does not mention Susan at all, or quote any of the hundreds of letters spanning four decades between the two women. Smith characterizes Susan in greater detail, describing her great intellect, her lifelong interest in writing both poetry and prose, and the fact that Bowles, delivering the commencement remarks at Amherst, wanted to grant her an honorary degree (70).

I mourn this morning, Susie, that I have no sweet sunset to gild a page for *you*, nor any bay so blue—not even a little chamber way up in the sky, as your’s is, to give me thoughts of heaven, which *I* would give to you. You know how I must write to you, down, down, in the terrestrial; no sunset here, no stars; not even a bit of *twilight* which I may poetize—and send you! Yet Susie, there will be romance in the letter’s ride to you—think of the hills and the dales, and the rivers it will pass over, and the drivers and conductors who will hurry it on to you; and wont that make a poem such as can ne’er be written? (*Open Me Carefully* 15)

Dickinson evokes the vast communicative networks through which the letter must pass to move from her hands to Susan Gilbert’s. Dickinson insists on the embodied nature of speech, of her writing which exists “down, down, in the terrestrial.” Contrary to proving that the “you” is Susan only, she remembers the many bodies through whom her address must travel, ambient, before it reaches her intended addressee. She imagines “the hills and the dales, and the rivers it will pass over, and the drivers and conductors who will hurry it on to you.” By the time this letter was written in 1852 America, post offices, as David Henkin argues in *The Postal Age*, “became classic sites of public life and evocative models of heterogeneous and promiscuous intermingling” (10). Henkin describes how technological developments, such as steamboats, canals, and railroads, helped instantiate the communicative network of the post in the nineteenth century (22). Dickinson dwells on the role that strangers play, the unspecified number of “drivers and conductors” whose ultimately unknowable collectivity transmits, touches, breathes with and alongside her breath. No utterance remains limited to its author, but rather sound spills out over the landscape: it echoes; it wakes the neighbors. In this way, no letter “directly addresses a ‘you,’” as Jackson says (133), but indirectly encompasses many. The letter is constitutively ambient.

Even within the apparent privacy of the home, after the envelope has travelled the communicative networks that make manifest the connectivity of things, the letter continues to address many, despite the fact that the name on the envelope may be singular. In the nineteenth century, it was conventional that when one member of the family received a letter, the whole household would share in some way with the indeterminate, variously multiplying address. Later in the same letter, Dickinson makes reference to this practice:

Susie, what will you say if I tell you that Henry Root is coming to see me, some evening of this week, and I have promised to read him some parts of all your letters; now you wont care, dear Susie, for he wants so much to hear, and I shant read him anything which I know you would not be willing—just some little places, which will please him so—I have seen him several times lately, and I

admire him, Susie, because he talks of *you* so frequently and beautifully (*Open Me Carefully* 17)

Although Dickinson playfully asks permission to read Henry passages from Gilbert's letters, she also makes clear that sharing is a compulsory characteristic of occupying community. This passage blurs any distinct separation between participatory consent and a more vague, atmospheric, implicit accord. Agency in this way becomes collaborative, dispersed between the community present and absent, rather than focused in any single acting subject. Dickinson asks, "what will you say if I tell you," but goes on to tell, making the call's response moot.<sup>58</sup> "I have promised," she admits, then coaxingly insists, "now you wont care, dear Susie." Although hearing happens automatically, Henry "wants so much to hear," which twins the body's reflexive action with ardent desire. Indeed, the telling and sharing in this passage would happen anyway, like hearing, but Dickinson's affectionate familiarity makes what might otherwise be an atmospheric quality into one motivated by love. By passing along Henry's crush on Susan, and sharing Susan's words with Henry, Dickinson acts as a medium between them, herself sharing in and creating flirtatious energy. She becomes a go-between, an agent of ambience.<sup>59</sup> Dickinson impulsively shares with Henry as she shares the fact of that sharing with Susan. Further, she closes the letter with the convention of passing along the words of others: "Much love from Mother and Vinnie, and then there are *some others* who do not dare to send—" Although Dickinson writes the letter, her voice becomes by the end the voice of a community known and unknown. In the most obvious context, the "*some others*" refers to Henry and his not-so-secret crush. But it also radiates out more suggestively to the letter's many unknown participants to whom Dickinson has already alluded, the drivers and conductors, the hills and dales; the community that we see mapped in this letter is omnidirectional.

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<sup>58</sup> The expanded timescale across which the nineteenth-century conversation by letter would have to take place is one that Henkin describes in *The Postal Age*. He tells of the correspondence of the Callaghan siblings, who grew up in Virginia in the first part of the nineteenth century: "'Your letter of the 25th. April came safe to hand a longtime after its date,' wrote Oliver in Virginia to William in Missouri in a communication composed in late July of 1833 and posted in early August." (20). We can assume that the variously and unpredictably extended period between letters, as well as a somewhat random expectation of whose turn it was to write, was long built into the understanding of the epistolary genre. See for example the earlier correspondence between Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra: "My dear Cassandra, I am obliged to you for two letters, one from yourself and the other from Mary, for of the latter I knew nothing till on the receipt of yours yesterday, when the pigeon-basket was examined, and I received my due. As I have written to her since the time which ought to have brought me hers, I suppose she will consider herself, as I choose to consider her, still in my debt" (Sunday June 2, 1799, *Letters of Jane Austen* 13).

<sup>59</sup> As we have seen, the word ambient comes from the Latin *ambientem* (nominative *ambiens*), "a going around," the present participle of *ambire*, "to go around, go about."

This omnidirectionality constellates physical and social togetherness. Tellingly, Dickinson writes that she will read aloud “just some little places” in Susan’s letters, a phrase that reinforces both the physicality of the letter—the letter holds places, regions, territories—and the social quality of ambience which the sharing of the letter makes apparent. The letter travels across “the hills and the dales,” and connects bodies which are at a distance, much in the same way that the hills and the dales themselves connect bodies in echoing soundscape. Throughout the letter, speech metaphorically becomes physicalized. She describes seeing “dear Mattie,” and how “the time was *filled full*” with talk of Susan, as though sound’s resonance had actual substance: “and when the latch was lifted and the oaken door was closed, why, Susie, I realized as never I did before, how much a *single cottage* held that was dear to me.” The cottage, importantly, doesn’t actually hold Susan. But its walls echo back the repeating sound of her name, its roof shelters people who love her. Speaking of Susan conjures her presence with a power that becomes explicitly sacramental: “remember home and Amherst, then know, Loved One—that *they* are remembering *you*, and that ‘two or three’ are gathered in your name, loving, and speaking of you—and will you be there in the midst of them?” In spell-like chiasmus, speech is embodied and it embodies. It makes time “*filled full*” with its fleshly substance, and calls Susan forth into the room.

### 5. “The bells are ringing, Susie”

Jackson cautions against reading Dickinson’s letters as if they were poems. Against critics such as Martha Nell Smith and Ellen Hart, who have collected Dickinson’s correspondence online and in *Open Me Carefully*, Jackson levies the indictment that they “motivate generic confusion” (126). Jackson calls out Hart and Smith for using the phrase “artistic strategy” when it comes to Dickinson’s epistolary composition: artistic strategy, argues Jackson, suggests “Dickinson’s authority as a poet” (126). Yet although Jackson disagrees with Smith and Hart in rhetorical terms, her reading methods themselves hold suggestive similarities. “Rather than try to decide whether Dickinson wrote poems or letters, or letters as poems, or poems in letters,” she writes, “I want to focus on the figures of address in her writing, on how and why and where Dickinson invokes ‘you’” (126). This gorgeous sentence, which performs in its chiastic style the motivation of generic confusion against which Jackson inveighs, itself flirts with the same confusion. By switching the words “letters” and “poems” across rapidly switching conjunctions and prepositions—poems or letters, or letters as poems, or poems in letters, truly an example of language-as-juggling—Jackson humorously swirls up a sense of interchangeability. But rather than following through with her denunciation of generic confusion, Jackson proposes instead to analyze Dickinson’s “*figures of address*.” This puts the epistolary convention of address in explicitly poetic terms. Jackson argues that “Dickinson’s early letter is careful not to turn her reader into

a personification rather than a person" (126), and yet, personification or no, Jackson's minute attention to Dickinson's address as a *figure*, still reads lyrically across genres.

In the spirit of Jackson's reading, rather than the explicit direction of her rhetoric, I want to show how Dickinson's early letter to Susan Gilbert employs vibrational poetics. My point is not to read the letter as a poem—clearly the letter is a letter. But just because it is a letter does not mean that tracing a familiar spirit, a consistency in artistic approach, throughout its lines, posits generic claims. On the contrary, Dickinson's vibrational poetics manifests as a style, and, moreover, it also imports an epistemological stance. That is to say, through style it demonstrates a way of thinking and a way of being that decenters agential human authority and roots conceptual abstraction in sonic materiality. Dickinson's vibrational poetics also insist on the body as the rooted, unconscious connector of ecstatic modes of consciousness—such as sleep and death—across time and space. In this section, I will dwell on the implications of this argument in the context of the letter to Susan, and in the final section I will step back to survey several more of Dickinson's poems.

As Jackson points out again and again, the "you" of this letter is specific and individual, rather than lyric and substitutable. And yet Dickinson's address of this individual "you" is powerfully and variously invocative, musical, alliterative, rhyming. The name "Susie" rings out in these pages like a tuning fork, the sound of a yearning which runs rhythmically constant through all other descriptions and exclamations. In this four-page letter, I counted thirty-one repetitions of the name Susie, with a range of affectionate intensifiers. The tender phrase, "Dear Susie," repeats oftenest, but we also encounter the sighing "Ah, Susie," the exclamatory "Oh Susie," the sweetly petulant "why, Susie." This repetition functions in a similar way to the repeating "hear" and "here" that I have already discussed. The name's reiterations vibrate in and out of a fixed center: they sound and sound again like a call, and they repeat one note through the letter's content. There is a way to read this form of vibration as centering, rather than de-centering—after all, the repetition focuses intensely on one object. But I want to emphasize instead the way in which Dickinson's repetition diffuses the name. Where is the center if the center is everywhere? Rather than having one fixed and constant point, the name Susie on the contrary breathes in omnidirectional ghostliness.

This repetition has the effect of multiplying the semantic content within the name and reminding us of its purely sonic qualities. Rather than contributing to the communication of meaning, the name Susie interrupts and delays. In this way, it might be described as noise. Often, Dickinson repeats the name before or after she introduces phrasing whose sonic qualities are forefront, whether in what these phrases say or in how they say it. She writes, "I mourn this morning, Susie, that I have no sweet sunset to gild a page for *you*, nor any bay so blue." Dickinson emphasizes the pun of "mourn" and "morning" by repeating the sound. We might even read "morning" as a verb-form of repetition itself. The pun would have already been apparent, but that Dickinson spins

the “mourn” sound into “morning” awakens language to its musical qualities, and “morning” becomes the activity of “mourn.” Of course to read “morning” as a verb form of “mourn” is nonsensical, purely sonic. “Morning” is a noun, not a verb. But sonically, it sounds out the gerund “ing,” and repeats the ongoingness of the sound, “mourn.” In this way sound, though repetition, acts out in poetic time what would otherwise be an abstract meaning referring to ongoingness. This musicality continues through the sentence, in the alliterative phrases “sweet sunset” and “bay so blue,” as well as the rhyme between “page for *you*” and “bay so blue.” Each of these sonic elements are strongly paired: pun, which splits two meanings; alliteration, which in these examples links two words; and rhyme, which here connects the mourning morning and the blue you. These sounds with their pairs develop, on the level of sound-pattern, a spell that conjures Dickinson’s missing pair, Gilbert. If a pun foregrounds the physical body of a word, doubles its body in sound; if repetition generates sound out of sound, this letter yearns forcefully and sonically to conjure Susie. And of course Susie *is* present, she exists again in every repetition of her name-as-noise.

These sonic devices hinge heavily on the joint between sound and meaning, swinging out into noise, into the physical properties of sound. Dickinson invites Gilbert to join her in this world of sound:

The bells are ringing, Susie, north, and east, and south, and *your own* village bell, and the people who love God, are expecting to go to meeting; dont *you* go Susie, not to *their* meeting, but come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing, and the preacher whose name is Love—shall intercede there for us! (*Open Me Carefully* 14)

Again, this passage is hinged. We can read Dickinson’s description of the ringing bells as an account of what she hears echoing across the landscape. But “The bells are ringing, Susie” also refers to the way in which the bells ring Susie. That is, Susie’s name is a bell throughout these pages, tolling again and again. The repetition of her name is what Dickinson hears. It is to this alternative sonic environment that Dickinson invites Susan. The village bells, as we have seen in Poe in the previous chapter, constitute a soundscape in which all vibrating bodies coexist in shared sensitivity to sound’s resonance. Dickinson identifies their sound, but interiorizes it. Again, she creates a hinge: “come with me this morning to the church within our hearts, where the bells are always ringing.” Perhaps the church within their hearts sounds the same bells as the village church, but sounds them differently at the same time, sounds them punningly. The bells ring Susie. Dickinson shows in this passage the way in which centering sound, the village bells that ring out and unify a landscape, can be powerfully decentering. Within the sound that affects everyone, she establishes an interior, alternative, queer

space. This turn from the exterior world to the interior is a turn that revises orientation in Sara Ahmed's sense of the word. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed writes: "What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as orientated? What difference does it make 'what' or 'who' we are orientated toward in the very direction of our desire? If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (1).<sup>60</sup>

In the same way, Dickinson writes, "I sit here Susie, alone with the winds and you." The absence of the "you" is precisely what she is lamenting. But the absent "you" is simultaneously present in the you's sound, which blows through and around her as she writes. Dickinson implies through this comparison between the wind and "you" that Susie is present as inspiration, whose etymological connection to breath through the Latin verb, *inspirare*, is well known. Gilbert is present as a spirit which stands in contradistinction to the institutionalized religion being celebrated at the same time in church. This is a spirituality "whose name is Love," whose sacraments are sound, and whose god is inspiration's breath.<sup>61</sup> Susie becomes omnipresent, environmental, through sound.

Using a similar device, Dickinson draws on the name's noisy sonic materiality, which becomes a physical body. Towards the end of the letter, Dickinson breaks down:

Susie, I have not asked you if you were cheerful and well—and I cant think why, except that there's something *perrennial* in those we dearly love, immortal life and vigor; why it seems as if any sickness, or harm, would flee away, would not dare do them wrong, and Susie, while you are taken from me, I class you with the *angels*, and you know the Bible tells us—"there is no sickness there." But, dear Susie, *are* you well, and *peaceful*, for I wont make you cry by saying, are you *happy*? Dont see the *blot*, Susie. It's because I *broke the Sabbath!* (*Open Me Carefully* 18)

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<sup>60</sup> I read Dickinson's relationship with Gilbert as queer without suggesting either that this orientation would have meant the same thing to them then as it does to us now, or that we will ever finally understand the nature of their relationship. In "Emily Dickinson and the Gothic in Fascicle 16," Daneen Wardrop writes that Dickinson used the pronoun "themselves" but was corrected by her editors (156). Although the pronoun, needless to say, did not hold the same valences in the nineteenth century as it does today as a marker of queer non-binary identity, Dickinson's use of the pronoun nevertheless suggests the inadequacy or even incorrectness of "he" and "she" as expressions of identity.

<sup>61</sup> Howe writes that Dickinson "loved upon her knees, as others pray" (*My Emily Dickinson* 26).

Dickinson performs an intense reciprocity, by which the phrase from which she rhetorically protects Susan — “I wont make you cry by saying, are you *happy?*”<sup>62</sup> — instead pierces her.<sup>63</sup> She invokes happiness by refusing to invoke it — or, more precisely, she lets sadness remain unnamed in two layers of apophasis, by saying by not saying a question whose answer is implied. The words true to her prediction hold a charmed capacity to make cry. Dickinson herself cries. Indeed, the manuscript of the letter (see figure 2) does show a now-yellowed, tear-shaped blot just a little above on the page, where Dickinson might have been poring, in the bottom-right rectangle created by fold lines, above the words “would not dare do them wrong”:

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<sup>62</sup> In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed writes: “But I do wonder whether a queer definition of love might want to separate love from happiness, given how happiness tends to come with rather straight conditions. I thus offer Simone Weil’s definition of love as a queer definition: ‘Love on the part of someone who is happy is the wish to share the suffering of the beloved who is unhappy. Love on the part of someone who is unhappy is to be filled with joy by the mere knowledge that his beloved is happy without sharing in this happiness or even wishing to do so.’ Queer love might involve happiness only by insisting that such happiness is *not* what is shared” (100).

<sup>63</sup> We could also follow this reciprocity the other way. Dickinson uses sound like a ditty in an advertisement to lodge herself in Susan’s mind. She signs the letter, “Who loves you most, and loves you best and thinks of you when others rest? // T’is Emilie —.” David S. Reynolds in “Emily Dickinson and Popular Culture” has argued that Dickinson was influenced by the popular culture of her time. He suggests that Dickinson’s frequently flippant tone about spiritual matters shows the influence of the Rev. Charles Wadsworth, for whom Reynolds says she had an “unrequited passion” (169). Reynolds links her strong imagery and references to inebriation to temperance literature of the time, and shows where some of her poems have similarities with sensational literature. He concludes by comparing Dickinson to other American women writers and rather problematically argues that the way they critique female stereotypes “pales beside” Dickinson, a construction that not only pits women against one another, but furthermore does so via a submerged metaphor that evokes the highly gendered imagery of paling and blushing (184). (The *OED* entries for the verb “pale” in its meaning of “To grow pale or dim; to lose colour or brightness; to become pale in comparison,” consistently draw out this gendered quality — see for example, J. Reynolds in 1623, in *Triumphs Gods Revenge*: “Both blushing and paling hereat..she returns him this answer,” and G. Daniel in 1637 in *Genius of Isle*: “The Red Rose pal’d, the White was soil’d in red.”) Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to follow this argument in more detail, my intuition is that Reynolds’s point, as it pertains to popular culture if not to feminism, could be extended to popular music and advertising.



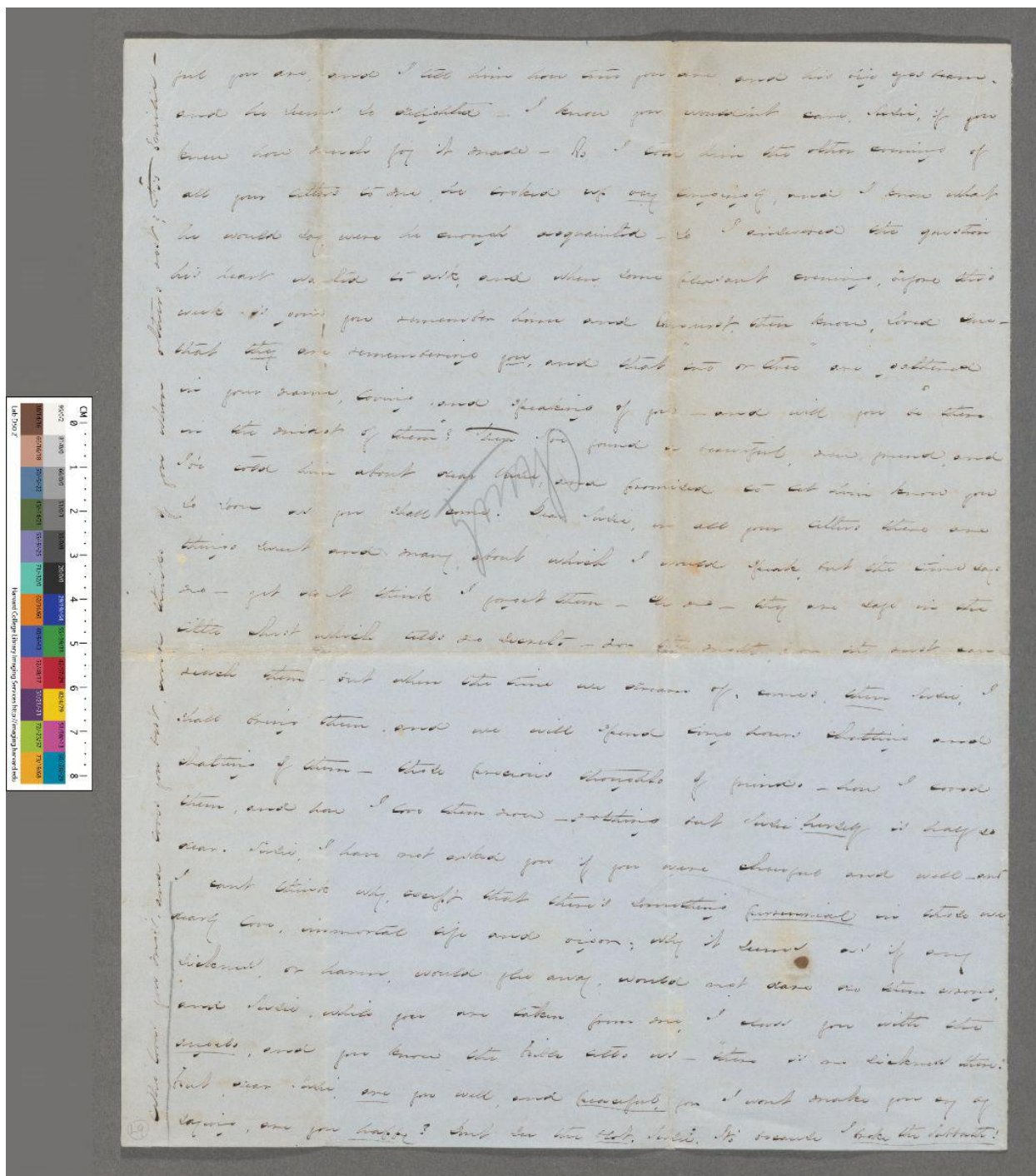


Figure 2. Emily Dickinson, "To Susan Huntington Dickinson," ca. 1852 February, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

The phrase, "Dont see the *blot*, Susie," works in the same hinge-like way as "The bells are ringing, Susie," which we have already seen. Dickinson asks Susie not to notice the blot made on the paper by her tear falling. But the blot is also the name Susie itself: excessive, proliferative, interruptive, it exceeds the strict sequential flow of the letter—it

dots the whole page. The sound “Susie” is in excess of the meaning, like white noise, or village bells, ambient. And like a blot, it makes visible the physical quality of ink as ink: the name Susie asks Susie herself to be present, as the blot demands that we consider the ink’s material properties.

“There’s something *perrennial* in those we dearly love.”<sup>64</sup> The sonic passion in this letter does somehow levitate above time; there is a way in which Dickinson, through repetition, makes “now” continuous with “always.” Recurrence creates continuity which creates immortality. A perennial is a plant which doesn’t need to be re-planted, like an annual, but instead comes back in the spring. As such, it embodies in the vegetative world what Dickinson effects in the sonic. Words return and make time extensive: “I think of you dear Susie, *now*,” she writes, and again, “but *now* Susie,” and over and over again, “she loves you so dearly, and is never tired of talking about you, and we all get together and talk it oer and oer,” until the repetition becomes forever: “*Always* when the sun shines, and always when it storms, and *always always* Susie, we are remembering you, and what else besides *remembering*; I shall not *tell* you, because you know!” As time itself can be taken for granted, so the ongoingness of love exists always. Since the word “always” means forever, one iteration would technically be sufficient. But Dickinson’s generous redundancy shows how forever happens, continuously, in sound.

## 6. “Ecstasy’s impediment”

In this concluding section, I want to take a step back and offer a looser reading of several of Dickinson’s poems. I believe that vibrational poetics offer a way to theorize the decentering, destabilizing forces of sound that echo throughout Dickinson’s work, and my intention in these final pages is to give a model for reading within her poetry more broadly. Vibrational poetics sound out a structure of questioning which is rooted in the labyrinths of the body. The body absorbs ambient sound outside itself, which correspondingly makes the body continuous with and indistinct from this absorbed outside. Containment, as we have seen, mutually contains. The body—in all its heaviness and rootedness in the material world—is the site from which Dickinson, again and again, chooses to explore ecstatic modes of consciousness such as sleep and death. The body breathes, the body lies cold. From reading Dickinson we have become accustomed to hearing corpses speak. The late 14<sup>th</sup>-century word, *exstasie*, “elation,” comes from the Old French *estaise*, or “ecstasy, rapture,” from Late Latin *extasis*, from Greek *ekstasis*, “entrancement, astonishment, insanity; any displacement or removal

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<sup>64</sup> Christopher Ricks might interpret the extra “r” in Dickinson’s spelling of the word “perrennial” as a submerged appreciation of the word’s generative and generating plenitude (see his *Keats and Embarrassment*).

from the proper place," in New Testament "a trans," from *existanai*, "displace, put out of place," or *existanai phrenon*, "drive out of one's mind," from *ek* "out" and *histanai*, "to place, cause to stand." These etymologies show ecstasy's ambience. Ecstasy involves the "displacement or removal from the proper place," into dispersed being that moves vibrationally across bodies and regions, rather than holding any fixed center. For Dickinson, these ecstatic states hold fascination, and they often manifest themselves in a sensitivity to sound:

The fascinating chill that music leaves  
Is Earth's corroboration  
Of Ecstasy's impediment—  
'Tis Rapture's germination

In timid and tumultuous soil  
A fine—estranging creature—  
To something upper wooing us  
But not to our Creator—  
(F 1511, J 1480)

This poem's music sounds out after music's sounds have died. Music is a chill—or rather, it leaves behind a chill. Sound is felt in the body, in a form of sensing which is adjacent to rather than synonymous with hearing. The chilled body shivers, and this shivering mirrors the vibrations of soundwaves. After the speaker's body in this poem has absorbed the music, her own body thrums with "tumultuous" rhythm, vibrates in response to and echo of the force still felt. What is ecstasy's impediment? It is the body, the conscious self, which feels fascination and cold. "Impediment" is cognate with the Latin *pedis*, foot, which evokes both the plodding of the body and the rhythm of the poem, which shuffles along in poetic feet. Sound gives an embodied sense of what lies beyond the body, but the "something upper wooing us" is importantly not "our Creator," but something which is not coherent. The "something upper" is closer to the soundwaves which vibrate in the atmosphere, sirens of an unknowable ambience.

Sound gives Dickinson a model for imagining ineffable substance beyond the body which yet is radically embodied. A vibrational evocation of sound represents sound in a series of superlative comparisons that posit conditionally, move beyond, and move beyond again. Sound in this way gives a model for thinking the ineffable with the lungs, with a breathing that vibrates:

Better—than Music!  
For I—who heard it—  
I was used—to the Birds—before—

This— was different— 'Twas Translation—  
Of all tunes I knew— and more—

'Twasn't contained— like other stanza—  
No one could play it— the second time—  
But the Composer— perfect Mozart—  
Perish with him— that Keyless Rhyme!

Children— so— told how Brooks in Eden—  
Bubbled a better— Melody—  
Quaintly infer— Eve's great surrender—  
Urging the feet— that would— not— fly—

Children— matured— are wiser— mostly—  
Eden— a legend— dimly told—  
Eve— and the Anguish— Grandame's story—  
But— I was telling a tune— I heard—

Not such a strain— the Church— baptizes—  
When the last Saint— goes up the Aisles—  
Not such a stanza splits the silence—  
When the Redemption strikes her Bells—

Let me not spill— its smallest cadence—  
Humming— for promise— when alone—  
Humming— until my faint Rehearsal—  
Drop into tune— around the Throne—

(F378, J 503)

Although what Dickinson describes is "Better— than Music," Music remains the basis of comparison. And whatever form the superlative substance might have taken, she senses it like sound: "I— who heard it." There is something distinctly ambient about this excessive and expansive experience: "I was used— to the Birds— before— / This— was different— 'Twas Translation— / Of all tunes I knew— and more." Like birdsong ringing out heard and unheard in a landscape, this sound is beyond consciousness. Whereas rational thought structures the cadences and harmonious relations that make up music, this sound is not "contained," but exists as parts, as waves, not as a whole. Again, the poem stands as a remainder after ecstatic feeling, breathlessly silent: "Let me not spill— its smallest cadence— ." The poem is what remains, a thinking body, almost a corpse. When the live body imagines death, it becomes a sister to the dead body imagining life.

Dickinson's charged rhythmic spaces are not not hearing. Dashes are silence physicalized, pressurized, what rhythm itself might look like were rhythm to be embodied.

I would not paint—a picture—  
 I'd rather be the One  
 Its bright impossibility  
 To dwell—delicious—on—  
 And wonder how the fingers feel  
 Whose rare—celestial—stir—  
 Evokes so sweet a Torment—  
 Such sumptuous—Despair—

I would not talk, like Cornets—  
 I'd rather be the One  
 Raised softly to the Ceilings—  
 And out, and easy on—  
 Through Villages of Ether—  
 Myself endued Balloon  
 By but a lip of Metal—  
 The pier to my Pontoon—

Nor would I be a Poet—  
 It's finer—Own the Ear—  
 Enamored—impotent—content—  
 The License to revere,  
 A privilege so awful  
 What would the Dower be,  
 Had I the Art to stun myself  
 With Bolts of Melody!

(F348, J 505)

Again, this poem traces receding frames by imaginatively evoking what the speaker, apophastically, then lays by. "I would not paint—a picture—," she both affirms and negates. The expression toward which she yearns exceeds expression's capacity, a "bright impossibility." Rather than desiring to be an agent who makes, the speaker here fantasizes about being passively awash in a community of sound, "Raised softly to the Ceilings—/ And out, and easy on—/ Through Villages of Ether—." In the final stanza, we again encounter the figure of the speaking ear. Rather than be a poet, the speaker prefers to "Own the Ear." The incredible image of "Bolts of Melody" most immediately

evokes melody like a lightning bolt, charged, electric. But it also breaks melody down into its component parts as bolts, its waves or vibrations. And of course Dickinson is a poet of bolts, her dashes which flash volt-dense across the line.

Vibration offers a way to think about the fluidity between Dickinson's terms, her conceptual expansiveness which is rooted in the labyrinths of the ear. What resonances unmake sound's coherence, or what incoherence already inheres as waves in sound? And what communities come into being through vibration's embodying? Dickinson's vibrational poetics allow a way to think about ecstatic modes of consciousness, which include states in which consciousness stands outside itself. For vibration keeps the subject always outside of itself, decentered, ecstatic. This refusal to cohere runs throughout Dickinson's work, in poems and letters that thrum with questions. For Dickinson, I have argued, it is the body that questions, in rhythmic feet, the pieces that stay pieces, that remain remains. Questioning demonstrates the unanswerability of the question, and so question returns, a refrain that does not reinforce, but unsettles.

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