

Silent Sound: Imagination and Identification

Abstract Silent sound surrounds us in our daily life, a bubble of internalised audio that plays continuously, like a musical theme running through a jazz improvisation. An idea has its own sound, and the written word may evoke a sound, or suggest to us the nature of our relationship within the greater sound world that surrounds us. Listening is linked to seeing, and it is a quality that informs both our sense of who we are, and how we form our responses to the world around us. This chapter asks the reader to actively listen to themselves even as they absorb the words on the page. From this spreads the immediate sound world around them, the place that is their context for being in a precise moment. This act in itself creates a strong metaphor for the theme of the book—the separation and melding of sound environments that together shape identity.

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Pictures in words · Active listening

HAUNTED WORDS

In his book, *Air and Dreams*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard invokes the idea of two forms of silence, those that are mitigated by breathing, which he suggests to be a form of speech, and those that are held behind the lips, which he calls ‘closed silence’. He suggests that ‘the moment...aerial imagination is awakened, the reign of *closed silence*

is ended. Then there begins a silence that breathes. Then there begins the reign of “open silence....” (Bachelard, 242). In this, he is addressing himself ‘to the experience of all those who can feel *vocal pleasure* without having to speak, to all those who are stimulated by silent reading and who lay on the threshold of their morning the verbal dawn of a beautiful poem’ (ibid., 244).

Poetry—like sound—creates pictures in the mind, visual images that reverberate in the memory, often returning, whether prompted or unprompted, when we least expect it. We may be on the commuter run, peering at the urban landscape on a wet Monday morning, when some recalled line in a poem takes us somewhere else entirely. I remember just such an occasion during the 1960s as a student, travelling down the Hagley Road from my college in Birmingham into the city on the number 9 bus, reading Walter Scott’s ‘Lay of the Last Minstrel’, and discovering these lines about the ruins of Melrose Abbey:

If though wouldst view fair Melrose aright,
 Go visit it by the pale moonlight;
 For the gay beams of lightsome day
 Gild, but to flout, the ruins grey.
 When the broken arches are black in night,
 And each shafted oriel glimmers white;
 When the cold light’s uncertain shower
 Streams on the ruin’d central tower;
 When buttress and buttress, alternately,
 Seem framed of ebon and ivory;
 When silver edges the imagery,
 And the scrolls that teach thee to live and die;
 When distant Tweed is heard to rave,
 And the owlet to hoot o’er the dead man’s grave,

Then go – but go alone the while –

Then view St David's ruin'd pile;

And, home returning, soothly swear,

Was never scene so sad and fair!¹

I include that passage in full, because it is all about imagery: visual images of course—sights that stirred the gothic imagination of a fresher on his way to college on a murky morning in 1965—but also sound, some of which is suggested literally in the text, but also whispers and murmurs that the reader can create for themselves. For poetry, again like sound, is a partnership between the maker and the reader/listener; that is why we remember the most powerful examples of both; we have, in fact, helped to create it through the interplay of words/sounds and the imagination. The poet Tom Paulin said that 'one shouldn't simply be visualising what one reads, one should be hearing it' (Paulin in Sider, Freeman and Sider, 46). Scott tells us we can hear an owl, and the faint tumult of the distant River Tweed, and by so doing he creates such a wonderful sense of aural perspective, the presence of the stream and the owl startling us close by, that we hear it, just as he suggests that we should. By giving us these two sound images, and these only, he also plays us the silence of the rest of the scene; there is no other sound, it is still, and as the poet instructs us, we are alone. We may leave it at that—it is enough, surely?—or we may add our own subtle audio to the mix (we are makers in this process too, don't forget). Is there a low wind moaning through the Aeolian harp of the 'gothic arches'? Are their rooks calling through the early night? I have not been to Melrose Abbey, so I have no idea if rooks inhabit the place, but this is my picture, this is between me and the poet, and if my imagination wants dark mysterious birds, it shall have them. The words that began on the bus in a suburban traffic jam are now working inside my mind, developing, intensifying and becoming a part of who I am. The poem that started outside of me in a book, an object in my hands, has now wormed through my consciousness and internalised itself forever, awaiting only the prompted or unprompted recall of circumstance, voluntary or involuntary memory. Now, as you read this text, you inherit them, and have the capability, should you choose to exercise it, of conducting the same sound transference exercise as you listen to the words on the page within your mind.

In May 1819, John Keats wrote a poem which is as full of sound as any that came from his pen. Yet the key feature of this poem, the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, is the juxtaposition of silence and clamorous sound. This is a meditation on the embossed images of a Greek vase of unspecified origin. Prior to writing the poem, accounts tell us that he had been impressed by a number of works in the British Museum and elsewhere, among them the Townley Vase, the Borghese Vase, the Holland House Vase, the Elgin Marbles and the Sosibios Vase, of which he made a drawing.² The Ode was published anonymously in the journal, *Annals of the Fine Arts* in January 1820, just a month before the onset of the poet’s last illness. It begins:

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time...

When the work was first published, a comma was inserted after the word ‘still’. In subsequent publications, this was removed. It is highly significant to the meaning of the poem, changing ‘still’ from an adjective to an adverb; the first meaning implies lack of movement, or more, complete absence of physical sound. The absence of the comma implies that, as Andrew Motion has written, ‘the urn is only touched by damage or interpretation for the time being. Its days are numbered’ (Motion, 392). Let us consider the line with the comma replaced:

Thou still, unravish’d bride of quietness...

The virginal quality of the vase remains intact, while its silence touches us with awe in the context of the noisy world in which we observe the object. Keats, though, hears another world of sound as he observes the urn, one of pagan carousing and orgy:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth,

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Keats’s mind is running riot as he brushes his imaginative fingers over the braille of the embossed forms depicted on the vase, resulting in one of the noisiest poems he ever wrote. Yet it is all in the fancy, conjured by

the brain from dumb witness. This, for the poet, makes the sounds all the clearer, all the more eloquent:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone...

This is the silent sound we create when we read, when we view a work of art, or indeed when we mentally interact with the world in general around us. The soundtrack is our own, a response to stimuli either spontaneously experienced or imposed subjectively by the chosen act of concentrated attention on words or images. In other words, we have the capacity to *make* sounds within our imagination, as well as to *interpret* sounds heard externally.

Those sounds from outside us flood in without our control, enveloping internal silence and placing us in the world. A simple experiment demonstrates this: open your door or window for the first time in the morning with your eyes closed. The ambience of our immediate environment rushes into the head, and at once we know where we are, have a sense of the weather around us and begin to identify required information that complements our other senses. It is as though we are a kind of torus, and inside us, in the 'space within the whole' there is a silence waiting to be filled, like a reservoir that the sound world 'tops up' as we engage with the sonic circumstances of where we are. In the case of the imaginative sound that is *self*-created (or rather created through interaction between the mind and an otherwise silent source—as with Keats's vase), we approach a deeply personalised area of our being, in which each of us may 'hear' something different, or at least a variant of the same sound, 'tuned' by our own imagination. Keats is *reading* the vase, as he might read a book. As Dylan Thomas in *Under Milk Wood* makes the connection between hearing and seeing, likewise we may reverse that to identify the link between seeing and hearing. Images, objects and words are a form of notation that may or may not produce a sonic response in the mind; at least they may have the capacity to do so.

When we read an imagist text, be it prose or poetry, the imagination is stirred to create sound in partnership with the words, in other words

a soundtrack. It is as though that imaginative pool, apparently dormant, awaits signals sent from the eyes (in this instance) to set its musical instrument in motion. Thomas Hardy's most evocative sound world was that which he found around him in his native Dorset, notably in the vast area of woodland, farmland and bracken he named 'Egdon Heath'. The composer Gustav Holst wrote a tone poem for orchestra by that very name, a slow mysterious work that barely ever rises above a murmur, in an attempt at mirroring Hardy's moody landscape. In fact, Hardy himself used landscape far more subtly by creating an interaction between the individual *in* the landscape, and the person reading his text. Time and again, his characters find themselves as part of the natural world that surrounds them, and its sound becomes their sound, both as metaphor and as reality. In his novel, *The Return of the Native*, the exotically beautiful outsider, Eustacia Vye, living in a remote part of the Heath with her grandfather, isolated physically, keeps herself apart from the heath dwellers by her walks alone and her frequent nightly excursions to the summit of an ancient tumulus known as Rainbarrow. Separate from human discourse she may be, but on these excursions she seems to begin to speak with the voice of the landscape:

"The spirit moved them." A meaning of the phrase forced itself upon the attention; and an emotional listener's fetichistic mood might have ended in one of more advanced quality. It was not, after all, that the left-hand expanse of old blooms spoke, or the right-hand, or those of the slope in front. It was the single person of something else speaking through each in turn.

Suddenly, on the barrow, there mingled with all this wild rhetoric of night a sound which modulated so naturally into the rest, that its beginning and ending were hardly to be distinguished. The bluffs had broken silence, the bushes had broken silence, the heather-bells had broken silence; at last, so did the woman; and her articulation was but as another phrase of the same discourse as theirs. Thrown out on the winds, it became twined in with them, and with them it flew away. What she uttered was a lengthened sighing, apparently at something in her mind which had led to her presence there. (Hardy, 56–57)

It is surely no coincidence that Hardy gives his heroine a first name that reminds us of that part of our anatomy called the eustachian tube, defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as 'a bony and cartilaginous tube connecting the middle ear with the nasopharynx and equalising air pressure on both sides of the tympanic membrane—called also *auditory*

tube'. In other words, her very name is linked to the absorption and creation of sound! Adam Piette has called this relationship between person and place in the novel, 'the Eustacia-Heath rhyme', and it generates a subtly blended soundscape in the reader's mind that in turn creates an imaginative picture in which a woman stands alone on a bleak, lonely hilltop that serves as a metaphor for her personal isolation:

Thomas Hardy...was an expert at demonstrating what might be termed sonic pathetic fallacy, a supersensitive hearing of resonance between the "sounds" of external and internal nature. These sound-resemblances go to the heart of his sensitivity to the discrete mystery of hidden or buried feeling. (Piette, 25)

We know ourselves how a 'sense of Place' can overwhelm us at times, affecting our mood in a way that we find hard to identify. Hardy, and writers like him, has the capacity to play on our memory as we read, thus placing us *beside* their characters, in sympathy with them, even before we fully understand their predicament. It is achieved by a blend of recollection of sound and situation that creates empathy, and Hardy's minimalist canvas of Egdon Heath is anthropomorphised as emotion, just as later in the novel Eustacia again becomes sonically at one with her surroundings:

Between the dripping of the rain from her umbrella to her mantle, from her mantle to the heather, from the heather to the earth, very similar sounds could be heard coming from her lips; and the tearfulness of the outer scene was repeated upon her face. (Hardy, 346)

It is more than simply description; Hardy is using sound repetition in words like 'heather'/'earth'/'heard' to give a *colour* to the mood as well as a sound, as the woman's gentle but passionate sobs echo the interrupted journey of raindrops, and the gradual soaking of the scene and her face. We read the text as a musician would read a score, and as we do so, we 'play' the sounds in our imagination, and translate them into emotion, and thence into memory. Sound in this instance is literally a state of mind. The words on the page are a form of notation; we 'hear' them within the mind, but were we to transfer that experience to an external form, they would require a different structure in order to place them back in an auditory context, such as phonetics, acoustics or sound recording. We are familiar with the term 'record' as an object upon which sound is preserved, but the term 'record' in this context

was devised as a signifier of the preservation of an event, just as a note in the minutes of a formal meeting might be so perceived. In so doing, the process gives back the sonic orality to the written word, as it would have held meaning before print existed. R. Murray Schafer reminds us that phonetics and acoustics ‘are descriptive—they describe sounds that have already occurred—while musical notation is generally prescriptive—it gives a recipe for sounds to be made’ (Murray Schafer, 123). We might add, however, that a composer—or a writer—could be argued to be ‘describing’ sounds they have already ‘heard’ in their imaginations (Keats again). Equally, as we read, we have the capacity to ‘switch off’ our ‘listening’, either voluntarily or in spite of ourselves, just as we can find ourselves disengaging our attention from an audio source if it ceases to interest us, or if our mind is overwhelmed by other thoughts (The so-called cocktail party effect).

TIME AND PLACE

Historically, the act of physically recording sound imposed a form of reality on the mind, replacing what had previously been ‘heard’ silently. It is interesting to note that the etymological origins of the word ‘phonograph’, is as an object, as Shane Butler has reminded us, that ‘proposes to write (*graphein*) the voice (*phónē*)’ (Butler, 11). While Edison appropriated the term, he did not invent it, for, as Butler explains:

[The] linguist Edward Hincks had used it earlier in the century to designate those Egyptian hieroglyphs that were “representations of sounds,” and the word had entered the general lexicon via an invention that had spread as rapidly as Edison’s would: Isaac Pittman’s system of shorthand, described in his 1845 *Manual of Phonography, or Writing by Sound*. (Butler, 11–12)

All these forms present examples of attempts at recreating something invisible and transitory, just as an ancient Grecian urn attempted to preserve a moment of a temporal human emotion, the memory of an instant imagined or actually lived. We continue to listen to the world, to ‘read’ it, as we move through our lives and as we pause and reflect on a thought or a text.

It is here that the messages of the written word and the signals received by the brain from broadcast sound intersect; radio has sometimes been referred to as a ‘blind’ medium. For example, the radio

historian Andrew Crisell suggests that ‘radio has its limitations, all of which are associated with its blindness...’. In some cases, Crisell argues ‘we need visible words to help us understand invisible things’ while in others ‘we need visible things in order to help us understand the words’ (Crisell, 6). This is not to take account of the sheer imaginative visibility of sound objects when engaged with through active listening. Taking into account the idea of sound as ‘blind’, we might also be persuaded that the visual (in this case in the form of the printed page) is silent. Yet clearly it is not when it is engaged with through the mind. We may hear the immediate sound around us, while we may stretch our minds to imagine sounds beyond our physical hearing in the broader environment, like lateral layers moving out from our centre. The printed word enables us to ‘hear’ sound outside our experience through imagination. Anthony Doer’s novel, *All The Light We Cannot See*, set in the French town of Saint Malo shortly after D-Day, is a book about radio, sound and time. Alone in her great-uncle’s house, surrounded by radios and a clandestine transmitter, a blind girl is acutely aware of the sound of her surroundings, receding into the far distance, spreading out from the intimate sounds of the room in which she is trapped, any one of which may give her presence away to the occupying German forces:

Marie-Laure can sit in an attic high above the street and hear lilies rustling in marshes two miles away. She hears Americans scurry across farm fields, directing their huge cannons at the smoke of Saint-Malo; she hears families sniffing around hurricane lamps in cellars, crows hopping from pile to pile, flies landing on corpses in ditches; she hears the tamarinds shiver and the jays shriek and the dune grass burn...she hears cows drink from stone troughs and dolphins rise through the green water of the Channel; she hears the bones of dead whales stir five leagues below...With her free hand, she opens the novel in her lap. (Doer, 390–1)

What the girl hears in her mind is wordless, a soundscape of the imagination. Yet, as Doer would have us understand, these sounds are actually occurring at the moment Marie-Laure senses them. The simultaneity of sonic existence is a fact, to which the passage draws attention, heard through suggestion in the textual pictures on the page, images that would equally transmit themselves through the spoken word of a radio broadcast, an audio book, or through simply being read aloud. In any of these ‘readings’ of the text, the mind absorbs pictures.

Wilfred Owen, in his famous sonnet, ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ provides a striking contrast between sound and silence in the octave and

the sestet. The first stanza is cacophonous; it is like listening to multiple conflicting discordant soundtracks playing at the same time.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?

— Only the monstrous anger of the guns.

Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle

Can patter out their hasty orisons.

No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;

Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,—

The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;

And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

Owen's work, like that of his hero, John Keats, is full of audio, and like Keats, he recognises the sonic potency of certain words, words that evoke both sound and feeling at the same moment. Keats, in his ode 'To Autumn' makes us hear what he sees and hears when he writes '...in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn', while Owen takes the same sound and sends it mad. Also like Keats, it is instructive to examine how the poem evolved, in its sonic detail. 'Anthem for Doomed Youth' was written during September and October 1917; a month earlier, Owen had drafted a poem which has been subsequently named 'But I was Looking at Permanent Stars'³ in which the bugle image makes an earlier appearance:

Bugles sang, saddening the evening air,

And bugles answered, sorrowful to hear.

The evolution of the sound is clear between the two poems, and in 'Anthem' Owen uses it at the end of the hellish uproar of the first stanza of the sonnet, which places us directly in the field of battle as a bridge into future memory and the sorrow of those left behind. In the subsequent six lines comes a response to the seemingly unanswerable question of the opening, an elegiac stillness, and with it a tragic gentleness:

What candles may be held to speed them all?

Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes

Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.

The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,

And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Like dance or abstract painting, pure sound can act on our senses to open doors to individual worlds of imagination, each of them intensely personal and direct, and working with our other senses—in particular sight—creates interactions and juxtapositions in the mind that are the very stuff of poetry. The interaction between the senses operates on numerous levels; poetic drama may have the potency of a text absorbed in silent contemplation, while always offering the visual and auditory possibilities of performance. Sound, however, is the fundamental medium of storytelling, as witness Shakespeare's words in *King Lear*, a play which revolves crucially around the relationship between seeing and not seeing, imaginary perceptions and reality. Near the end of the play, Lear has this exchange with the blinded Gloucester:

Lear.: ...you see how the world goes.

Glos.: I see it feelingly.

Lear.: What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes, with no eyes. Look with thine ears (Act 4, Scene 6).

Earlier in the same scene, Gloucester, seeking to throw himself from a cliff top to his death at Dover, is persuaded by Edgar through word imagery alone that he stands in just such a vertiginous place:

Edg.: Come on sir; here's the place; stand still.—How fearful
And dizzy 'tis, to cast one's eyes so low!
The crows, and choughs, that wing the mid-way air,
Show scarce so gross as beetles: half way down
Hangs one that gathers samphire, dreadful trade!
Methinks he seems no bigger than his head:

The fishermen, that walk upon the beach,
 Appear like mice; and yon tall anchoring bark,
 Diminish'd to her cock; her cock, a buoy
 Almost too small for sight: the murmuring surge,
 That on the unnumber'd idle pebbles chafes,
 Cannot be heard so high... (Ibid.)

Without his sight, Gloucester receives the images created by Edgar's storytelling as a kind of sound poem, his mind in partnership with the maker of the 'pictures', an ancient connection that belongs to the time when there was no written text, but only an orality communicating sacred and secular stories and myths. It is an innate skill we all possess, yet this kind of intense poetic response-experience—transferred to the everyday world—requires attention, the part-learned, part-intuitive discipline of active listening, in which the relationship between the mind and the ear is trained in a relationship with the world that is sensitive and tuned by instinct as well as by the search for meaning.

Drama as a visually read text provides silent sound through imagination, but as performance uses the space between words in a physically active way. Many dramatists have employed this device in a positive sense, to take the meaning to places where words cannot go. Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are prime examples of writers for whom mood, atmosphere and plot subtly change during these apparently blank windows that are nevertheless choreographed as an integral part of dialogue. Yeang Chui reminds us that 'in Pinter's plays, these harmless stage directions become tools of subjugation' (Chui, p. 46). Pinter is famous for using the pause in this way; indeed, as the theatre director Peter Hall has said, within the context of dramas such as, for example, *The Birthday Party* or *The Dwarfs*, the pause is a part of dialogue too active to be referred to as 'silence' at all:

A pause is really a bridge where the audience think[s] that you're this side of the river, then when you speak again, you're the other side. That's a pause... [...] It's a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in. It's not a dead stop – that's a silence, where the confrontation has become too extreme, there's nothing to be said until either the temperature goes down, or the temperature has gone up, and then something quite extreme happens. (Batty, 164)

Words—and the spaces between them—can transmit pictures physically through the ears and the brain in concert with the eyes, but as we have seen, we are capable of consuming signals from a silent object through the imagination. Hardy's characters absorb environment and

merge with the place in which their imagined lives live and breath. It is also true that Hardy's novels have been a fruitful field for adaptation, in radio, in audio books and in film. This is significant because certain writers, while providing the clues from which we build our own soundtrack, may also offer imagery so seductive and stories so pertinent to the human condition, that they can exist—sometimes even more viscerally—in the adapted form as well as the original.

For the maker of visual images, however, there is a dangerous set of considerations to encounter: what does the mind need with second-hand images when it can create its own? Why do I need a radio presenter to tell me what I am hearing, when I can build my own playlist in my head, or on my smartphone? The image that interprets a sound may be too literal, while the image from which the sound is removed may have the capacity to burn itself into memory, just as the sound without the picture can become a part of our very self. The film editor and sound designer Walter Murch, famous for works such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Conversation* (both made with Francis Ford Coppola), has expressed the idea that the imaginative part in a film soundtrack has the capacity to be more positively interactive with the audience and that 'the perfect sound film has zero tracks. You try to get the audience to a point, somehow, where they can *imagine* the sound. They hear the sound in their minds, and it really isn't on the track at all. That's the ideal sound, the one that exists totally in the mind, because it's the most intimate' (Murch in Weiss and Belton, 359). The present writer remembers attending a screening of Carl Dreyer's silent film masterpiece, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. In the event, the movie was shown completely silently, without the 'comment' of music. A whole cinema audience sat in rapt stillness for 90 min, as the pictures burned themselves into the mind, and the imagined sound played in our heads. Just as sound can evoke pictures, so too can pictures make sound in the mind, be those pictures physical or words on a printed page. Early cinema was silent, and so its meanings were totally international; the visual message, often underlined by a musical commentary, was universal. Silence that accompanies the visual, like pure sound, requires no interpreter because it is open to individual interpretation. It is only when a specific language is introduced that the barriers appear.

SONIC CARTOGRAPHY

Not only do I inherit the sound of my environment, I become at one with it. When I consider this, I might take into account the living existences within a landscape, say birdsong, animal life in the

undergrowth, wind in trees, the ambience of the air, the distant rumble of industry and so on. On the other hand, the imagination can stretch its quest for silent sound into the very fabric of the earth itself. It is perhaps obvious that I can see and hear further through air and space than I can through matter, but nevertheless it might on reflection seem strange that the earth and the other substances upon which I stand should yield so little sound.⁴ In his essay, *Bedrocked*, Robert Macfarlane wrote:

The earth's skin stops sight short, and what is beneath grass or ground is lost to view, and largely lost to knowledge. We might call it the *underland*, perhaps, this vast and invisible dominion of rock and soil, rifts and mines, chambers and veins, dykes and tunnels, and minerals and groundwater, to the roof of which we are all moored by gravity. (Macfarlane in Stenger, 11)

What if maps could talk? What if the cartography of shape and place could be tethered to the cartography of thought and imagination? What if the earth's apparently silent voice could be translated into sound? In 2015, the AV Festival in the North East of England toured a sound installation by Susan Stenger, called *Sound Strata of Coastal Northumberland*. Stenger's 59-min work was a sonic representation of a 12-m-long hand-drawn cross-sectional map of the coastal strata from the River Tyne to the River Tweed, created by a nineteenth-century mining engineer and cartographer called Nicholas Wood. Her work in this context is based on the sound of drones from Northumbrian pipes, a bed upon which other sounds—song, industry and imaginative abstract compositional techniques—riff and intertwine. In an essay accompanying his map, Wood referred to the area under his consideration, from Newcastle to Berwick-upon-Tweed in musical terms, as a 'suite of rocks'. Stenger in her turn gave terrain, geology and cultural history a range of voices that overlaid one another as do the strata of the earth's fabric. In other words, she 'read' Wood's 'score' imaginatively and articulated it in sound.

This is exactly what we do within our head when we read a poem or a book, a mental process that gives us the instrumentation to orchestrate the printed codes into imagery. In fact, the internal process goes further, turns 365°, because it takes a picture, be it a visual or an audio image created by another mind, filters it through the neutral medium of words and reinvents it through personal experience and circumstance to make a

drama that in turn is mitigated by our own personality and placed in our memory bank. Gilles Deleuze has written: ‘Musical art has two aspects, one which is something like a dance of molecules that reveal materiality, the other is the establishment of human relationships in their sound matter’ (quoted in Stenger, 15). The miracle of composition is the revelation of patterns of sound placed on silence that touch a chord of recognition in us. We are each of us composers, and our orchestra is our imagination. Stenger’s sound work is rooted in a partnership with the visual. As she has said: ‘When I think about a new sound work I often visualise it and draw my ideas. I can thank my art teacher mother for this; she taught me about visual composition—organising line, shape, texture, colour—at a very young age...’ (Stenger, 52). She adds elsewhere, ‘I think “sonic incarnation” is a good term’ (Stenger, 63). So it is.

Stenger’s term may be applied here not only to a sound version of a visual object, but as a response that reflects the individual subjective ‘sound incarnation’ of the observer or listener.

When we listen, even to apparently nothing, we are hearing ourselves, in the context of our environment. Susan Sontag reflected this in terms of the visual when she pointed out that to look at nothingness or emptiness it still to see something, even if it be a projection of our own selves.⁵ It may be intensified by will or by experience, as John Cage proved in *4’33”*. The artist and composer Esther Venrooij developed this theme:

Being silent as a musician in an orchestra is an important part of the whole experience. Waiting for the start of a musical line and attending to notated rests are essential in musical performance. In all compositions there is a silent part. It is not the part of the conductor, but a *silent voice*. This silent voice is present before the musicians start playing, it follows along in time with the musical composition, it is audible when the musician remain silent or take a break, and it is still present after the final note. (Venrooij in Stephanides and Kohlmaier, p. 96)

We are not only surrounded by sound, as we shall discuss in the next chapter, in a real sense, we are sound, insofar as our thoughts, memories and reactions manifest themselves within our head in a kind of silent sound that plays continually, even during sleep. Because, although we may close our eyes, we cannot close our ears, so our personal soundtrack, while playing the song of our personality, changing and growing, is fed

by external sound experiences that aid and affect that development. Two people may look at the same Grecian urn, and while one might hear a narrative, there is no saying that it will be the one Keats heard, while the other may hear nothing at all, but experience the object in other ways. Further, our sonic interaction with the object—if there is one—may well be affected by the environment in which the object is placed. Listening to a Greek vase in an echoing gallery of the British Museum, full of tourist parties and conversation, will play into the mind in a different way to experiencing the same object in the stillness of a living room, so the blend of imaginative ‘tuning’ by the mind and external circumstance improvise a kind of jazz that makes the event different between individuals, and changed every time the experience is replicated. Likewise, the experience of listening to *Sound Strata of Coastal Northumberland* is a very different one for me now, as I play the CD version of it, and hear it through headphones, to the way I first heard it, in the acoustic environment of the Gymnasium Gallery at Berwick-upon-Tweed in the spring of 2015, on a stormy day, with the sound of trees and distant sea-wash outside. As Stenger has said herself:

Since the nature of sound waves is that they move in space, to be able to stand inside them – to feel them passing through you – is an important part of *Sound Strata*. The ability to be inside sonic structures, to perceive them in both an intellectual and visceral way, makes you feel like you’ve almost become part of the structure yourself. The stereo CD version... sounds great, but it can only evoke the work in one way, since it can’t recreate the experience of being in the space. (Stenger, 64)

One would only add to that last statement that for anyone who has first experienced the work in situ, the CD does in a way recreate the ‘live’ event—through memory, just as a recording of a concert performance has the capacity for taking us back to the memory of being part of it, without reproducing the exact acoustic conditions or our responses to them, that pertained at the time. To return, however, to the immediate point, someone other than Stenger, presented with the same commission, would of course have come to a different answer. Her use of the pipers’ drones as a motif through the piece acts as a kind of metaphor for the underlying sound bed upon we each of us build our sonic world. So it is with a read text. We respond—or not—according to a blend of past

experience and the emotional strings, all tuned differently, that vibrate in various ways within us.

Environment is clearly part of the content surrounding the bubble of concentration in which we interact with focused silent listening. The disconnection between read images ‘heard’ while on a bus or a busy commuter train is a part of the overall imaginative/memory experience. Just as we may listen to a sound picture of waves breaking on a South Seas beach while travelling through a suburban travel interchange, and thus have two sensory worlds sitting beside one another in our heads, so it is that hearing a written text silently creates a dichotomy between fantasy and reality, or perhaps one should say, two kinds of reality in parallel. Whether it be physical or imaginative listening, Salomé Voegelin is right to suggest that ‘listening allows fantasy to reassemble the visual fixtures and fittings, and repositions us as designers of our own environment’ (Voegelin, 12). Nevertheless, the noise of the world changes the rules of what the composer Pauline Oliveros has called ‘deep listening’, and we must focus and concentrate more if we are to find the stillness within us that is capable of absorbing the subtle sounds that are usually the most significant and rewarding. Stare at an apparently black night sky long enough, and you begin to see stars; likewise, if we consciously and actively listen with complete attention, we can focus on sounds of which we were previously unaware. If we can switch attention to the most interesting conversation in a cocktail party, we can do this. Oliveros refers to it as ‘sound fishing’:

Listening for what has not yet sounded – like a fisherman waiting for a nibble or a bite...Pull the sound out of the air like a fisherman catching a fish, sensing its size and energy...There are sounds in the air like sounds in the water. When the water is clear you might see the fish. When the air is clear, you might hear the sounds. (Oliveros, 50)

Making this a conscious decision is liberating. We are actively involved participants in this world of sound, just as we are a part of the natural world. We can be as much—or as little—integrated into the partnership as we choose to be, but the important realisation is that we are interactive creatures, and we have choice as practitioners in the exchange as to whether and how we break our inner silence. Further, we can do more than listen for silence and break silence: we can *make* silence, for

that inner silence is our most intimate possession. A loud sound can produce a phantom echo, like the after-image from blinking at a bright light. It can exist in silence, as it continues to exist in memory, and powerful emotions have a form of psychic sonic life, capable at times of delivering a spiritual seismic shock. Venrooij has attempted to reproduce this phenomenon in some of her early compositions, that is to say, to create the sensation of an experience of a sound without the sound itself being present. ‘By meticulously placing a very specific sound in a (horizontal/vertical) composition, this sound would still resonate in the listener’s mind after composition’ (Venrooij in Stephanides and Kohlmaier, 97).

A work of art can only fully exist when it is experienced, and whether we ‘hear’ it through reading, remember it or imagine it, we are ultimately both receiver and instrument. The point is we can ‘hear’ a thought within ourselves before it has been expressed. To return to Gaston Bachelard, invoked at the beginning of this chapter, ‘the spoken word is, as far as we can determine, projected before it is heard. According to the principle of projection, the word is willed before it is spoken. In this way, pure poetry is formed in the realm of the will before appearing on the emotional level’ (Bachelard, 244). If this is so in the making, it is surely true in the reading, a kind of thought transference; indeed, we sometimes use a phrase when describing an idea that communicates on this level, that it ‘speaks to us’, and these are the moments we retain within ourselves. ‘Music, when sweet voices die,/Vibrates in the memory...’ wrote Percy Bysshe Shelley. Later in the nineteenth century, the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins might have been answering both Shelley and John Keats when he wrote:

Elected Silence, sing to me

And beat upon my whorlèd ear,

Pipe me to pastures still and be

The music that I care to hear.⁶

NOTES

1. Scott, Sir Walter, 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel', Canto II, stanza 1.
2. See Motion, *Keats*, pp. 390–392.
3. See Stallworthy, Jon, *The Poems of Wilfred Owen*, p. 179.
4. Later in this book, we shall discuss the issue of non-cochlear sound, vibration and the body as conductor.
5. Sontag, Susan, 'The Aesthetics of Silence' in *Styles of Radical Will* (Picador, 2002).
6. Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 'The Habit of Perfection'.



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