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# **Modern Noise: Bowen, Waugh, Orwell**

Robin Edward Feenstra  
Department of English  
McGill University, Montréal  
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requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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*Abstract***Modern Noise: Bowen, Waugh, Orwell**

The modern soundscape buzzes with noise. In the 1930s, telephones, radios, and gramophones filled domestic spaces with technological noise, while crowds shouting in the streets created political clamour. During the war in the 1940s, bombs and sirens broke through buildings and burst through consciousness. This dissertation examines the response of three British modernist writers to the cultural shifts brought about by technology and politics, which altered everyday experience and social relations. Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell represent noise in their fiction and non-fiction as a trope of power. Noise, as a palpable emblem of discontent and the acoustic unconsciousness of the period, infiltrates sentences and rearranges syntax, as in the invention of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eight-Four*. Noise cannot leave listeners in a neutral position. The “culture racket” of the 1930s and 1940s required urgent new ways of listening and listening with ethical intent.

Chapter One provides a reading of Elizabeth Bowen’s audible terrains in her novels of the 1930s, where silences and sudden noises intrude on human lives. In Bowen’s novels, technological noise has both comedic and tragic consequences. Chapter Two examines noise as a political signifier in *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen’s novel of the blitz. Chapter Three takes up the significance of the culture racket to Evelyn Waugh’s novels and travel writing of the 1930s; noise assumes a disruptive, if highly comedic, value in his works, an ambiguity that expresses what it means to be modern. Chapter Four examines Waugh’s penchant for satirizing the phoneyess of contemporary

culture—its political vacillations—especially in *Put Out More Flags*, set during the Second World War. Chapter Five considers Orwell's engagement with the emerging social and political formations amongst working, racial, and warring classes in the 1930s.

Documenting noise in his reportage, Orwell sounds alarms to alert readers to the mounting social and political crises in his realist novels of the decade. Chapter Six argues that Orwell's final two novels of the 1940s, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, represent the politics of noise in as much as they announce the noise of politics in totalitarian futures. Noise demarcates the insidiousness of propaganda as it screeches from telescreens, the keynote in Big Brother's ideological symphony of domination. Noise, throughout Orwell's writing, signifies the struggle for power. In its widest ramifications, noise provides an interpretive paradigm through which to read Bowen's, Waugh's, and Orwell's fiction and non-fiction, as well as modernist texts generally.

## *Résumé*

### Le vacarme moderne: Bowen, Waugh, Orwell

L'époque moderne fait bien du vacarme. Dans les années 30, les téléphones, les radios, et les gramophones remplissaient l'espace domestique de bruits technologiques, alors que les foules protestant dans les rues créaient un vacarme politique. Dans les années 40, pendant la guerre, le bruit des bombes et des sirènes retentissait dans les consciences. Cette étude vise à examiner les réponses apportées par trois écrivains britanniques modernistes aux changements culturels liés à la technologie et à la politique, qui ont chamboulé l'expérience quotidienne et les relations sociales de leur époque. Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, et George Orwell représentent le vacarme dans leurs œuvres romanesques et non-romanesques comme emblème du pouvoir. Le vacarme, signe palpable de mécontentement et de l'inconscient acoustique de l'époque, infiltre les phrases et en modifie la syntaxe, comme en témoigne, par exemple, l'invention de Newspeak dans *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Le vacarme ne laisse pas indifférent. Le vacarme culturel ("culture racket") des années 30 et 40 rendait nécessaire de nouvelles manières d'écouter, y compris une écoute éthique.

Le premier chapitre analyse les terrains audibles dans les romans d'Elizabeth Bowen parus dans les années 30, dans lesquels les silences mais aussi de soudains vacarmes infiltrent les vies humaines. Dans les romans de Bowen, le bruit technologique a des conséquences à la fois comiques et tragiques. Le chapitre deux examine le vacarme en tant que signifiant politique dans le roman du blitz de Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*. Le troisième chapitre se penche sur la signification du vacarme culturel dans les romans et

les récits de voyage d'Evelyn Waugh parus dans les années 1930. Le vacarme apparaît ici comme une valeur de rupture, bien que comique, une ambiguïté propre à ce qu'est le moderne. Le chapitre quatre analyse le penchant de Waugh pour la satire qui dénonce le charlatanisme de la culture contemporaine, et ses vacillations politiques, particulièrement prononcés dans le contexte de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale de *Put Out More Flags*. Le cinquième chapitre analyse l'engagement d'Orwell avec les formations sociales et politiques émergentes parmi les classes ouvrières, raciales, et conflictuelles (ou en guerre) dans les années 30. Alors qu'il documente le vacarme dans son mode du reportage, Orwell sonne l'alarme pour alerter le lecteur aux crises sociales et politiques dans ses romans réalistes des années 30. Le chapitre six argumente que les deux derniers romans des années 40 d'Orwell, *Animal Farm* et *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, représentent la politique du vacarme en annonçant le vacarme politique des futurs totalitaristes. Le vacarme démontre le caractère insidieux de la propagande qui retentit au travers des écrans, le principal oratoire de Big Brother et de sa symphonie idéologique de domination. À travers l'œuvre d'Orwell, le vacarme signifie la lutte pour le pouvoir. Dans ses plus grandes ramifications, le vacarme représente un paradigme à travers lequel nous pouvons interpréter l'œuvre romanesque et non-romanesque de Bowen, Waugh, et Orwell, de même que les textes modernistes en général.

## Introduction: British Modernism and the Age of Noise

“The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire—we hold history’s record for all of them.” ~ Aldous Huxley

Emerging from the Age of Noise, modernist literature revels in clamour. From Wyndham Lewis’s vitriolic *Blast* (1914) to the “screaming” telescreens in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), noise imbues modernist texts. British modernists infuse their texts with both conscious and unconscious reverberations of a modern soundscape transformed by the inescapable presence of technologies, media, and masses. While many modernist writers demonstrate a fundamental ambivalence about noise, associating it with both positive and negative values, others deploy it as a key critical device in an ever-broadening critique of modernity. In particular, British writers of the 1930s and 1940s articulate how noise inflects culture and signals crisis. In metaphorical terms, noise signifies the ruckus of culture in formation and its breaking apart—what I call the “culture racket.” This dissertation examines the ways in which Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell incorporate noises in their prose writing between 1930 and 1950, from the domestic to the warlike, as imaginative and critical renderings of the culture racket. They represent noise both as a fixture of literary realism and as part of a modernist strategy bent on interference and disruption. These second-generation modernist writers reorient the central concerns of first-generation “high” modernists by turning more squarely toward the politics of culture, one fraught with noise.

Critical definitions of modernism vary among descriptions of aesthetic style, cultural form, and historical period. At its best, modernism reinvents culture by sweeping aside the old and staid and offering instead disruption and renewal; at its worst, modernism is obscure, disconnected, and aloof, “little more than a reactionary, even



paranoid, fear of popular culture” (Rainey xxiii). In his Introduction to *Modernism: An Anthology*, Rainey claims that definitions of modernism remain incomplete; scholars engage in an “ongoing dialogue with the contradictory heritage of modernism” (xxvii). Critics often opt for the plural “modernisms” to steer clear of perceived monolithic definitions that too easily group distinct figures and works into unified formal and socio-political movements, and that pave over the differences among writers of diverse national, ethnic, racial, and gender identities—a “group of related canons” (Hickman 28) rather than a single one. Nevertheless, critics find common denominators, especially when they talk about “high” modernism. Seamus Deane explains the High Modernist (circa 1880-1930) critique of the modern world as causing “fragmentation and anxiety” in the individual subject that was “produced by a loss of the coherent unity of the civilized world” (Deane 358). Traditional values were replaced by a “culture of excess, of kaleidoscopic variety offered to an indiscriminating and uneducated, even ineducable, public” such that, paradoxically, “the sensory overload of such a culture” in fact indicated its “barbaric state” (358). Modern culture suffered from abstraction and, contrarily, from “immersion in the inchoate and the sensory” (358).

Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide* popularized the exclusionary model of “modernism as an adversary culture” riddled with the “anxiety of contamination by its other,” mass culture (Huyssen vii). “Mass culture,” Huyssen suggests, “has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project” (47). Greg Barnhisel sees a similar critical reception of high modernism at work between the 1940s and the 1960s positioned in opposition to mass culture, and this definition “still persists today, even if only as a straw man: outwardly and explicitly concerned with the process of its own creation, formally

complex, erudite, resistant, psychologically sophisticated, apolitical, intellectual rather than emotional, masculine rather than feminine, and (as the *Little Review* put it) ‘making no compromise with the public taste’” (Barnhisel 733). As Leonard Diepeveen argues in *The Difficulties of Modernism*, the seemingly unnecessary convolutions of language and “cacophonous gibberish” earned modernism the “difficult” brand: “Not surprisingly, *all* the major early promoters of modernism (to cite a few: T. S. Eliot, Allen, Tate, Edmund Wilson, John Crowe Ransom, F. R. Leavis, William Empson, I. A. Richards, Yvor Winters) wrote about difficulty” (Diepeveen 3, 15-16).

Another critical approach, and one that strikes me as essential, holds up modernism as something more than “just a series of texts, or a set of ideas that found expression in them, or a set of devices in which those were embodied. It was a social reality, a constellation of agents and practices that converged in the production, marketing, and publicization of an idiom, a shareable and serviceable language within the family of twentieth-century tongues” (Rainey xxiv). Modernism is, thus, defined by form, style, idea, and period, but it is also a way of mediating the world, characterized by “alienation, uncertainty, instability, mechanization, and fragmentation” (Colletta 2). While the period of my study is chronologically defined (1930-1950), Anglo-American modernism seems to range between 1880 and 1950 or 1960. Most critics, however, deem that the experience of two world wars shapes modernism: 1914-1945. Some claim that 1939 stands as a terminal date: Samuel Hynes notes that year as one “of endings, but of no beginnings” (Hynes 340). Periodicity varies and is never perfect; yet the Second World War and its immediate aftermath mark modernism in its full maturity, not its death. When bombers roared overhead and delivered their explosive load, images of the

waste land settled into London streets as lived experience and forced thousands underground. Steeped in nightly traumas and morning recoveries, shoring up fragments against total ruin, becomes a routine occurrence as the inflections of a once avant-garde supposition reify the cultural idiom. Londoners were living out the ethos of Eliot's iconic long poem. "But what the Great War initiated," Marina MacKay argues, "the Second World War realised" (9). In all cases, noise inflects the modernist epoch. The boom of guns in the First World War resumes in the scream of sirens and doodlebugs in the Second. "The end? Say it with missiles then," echoes James Joyce (*Finnegans Wake* 115.2-3).

Noise in the 1930s and 1940s delineates culture as a terrain of struggle. Three hypotheses propel this notion. First, the control of noise reflects power and is thus "essentially political" (Attali 6). Whoever controls sound in modernist culture also controls the mechanisms of indoctrination and political culture. Equally, making a noise about something—raising a ruckus, disturbing the peace—is an explicit affront to order. Dissidence and orthodoxy, as Julia brazenly puts the case in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, can be indistinguishable to the untrained ear. Second, as a resistance to representation, noise challenges the limits of form and style; noise has syntactical consequences. In disrupting one message, noise constitutes another. Douglas Kahn defines "noise" as "an abstraction of sound" and contends that "significant noise" is a "legibility of an apparent illegibility" which brings about more rather than no communication (Kahn 25, 26). Noise depends on its context, particularly the ideology that envelops it. Noise does not automatically constitute a progressive form of disruption—as protests and rallies, for example, take for granted—but can in fact reinforce class structures and political hegemonies. Hence, the

third hypothesis: noise is an analogue for social relations. At various times, noise instigates group solidarity or class conflict. This tendency manifests itself in the most ubiquitous imperative of the period: to speak up and be heard. Indeed, noise is a palpable emblem of discontent.

The literature of 1930-1950 incorporates noise into its signifying practices as much as it is about noise. By “noise” I mean loud, harsh, unwanted, discordant sounds that disturb. I also mean, more loosely, interference and unintelligibility, especially with respect to language and communication. As Jacques Attali suggests, a “noise is a resonance that interferes with the audition of a message in the process of emission” (26)—a fitting description for the emergent phase of wireless transmission in the 1920s through the 1940s. Noise can appear in texts as a phenomenon or mimetic attribute that is experienced by someone or some narrative persona or consciousness. In Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922), a character or voice asks, “What is that noise?” (*Complete Poems and Plays* 40). Noise is generated by technologies, machines, and environments, as well as individuals and groups engaged in rumour, outcry, strife, and quarrelling. Language itself gives rise to noise as a theme in literature, such as the parody of Basic English through the invention of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Noise appears in literary texts in various ways and to varying degrees: as unintelligible or illegible language, code, manipulated font, disrupted discourse, shouts, whistles, blaring radios, invasive bells and rings, roaring machines, raucous behaviour, sirens, bombs. Dorothy Sayers’ *The Nine Tailors* (1934), John Sommerfield’s *May Day* (1936), Katherine Burdekin’s *Swastika Night* (1937), Rex Warner’s *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) and *The Professor* (1938), Graham Greene’s *Brighton Rock* (1938) and *The Ministry of*

*Fear* (1943), James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941), Louis MacNeice's *Autumn Journal* (1939), Henry Green's *Caught* (1943) and *Back* (1946), even Auden and Isherwood's *Ascent of F6* (1936) and *On the Frontier* (1938), are all thematically preoccupied with noise in unusual ways. Stevie Smith's *Over the Frontier* (1938) is particularly attuned to the telephone as a network of noise through which news comes "hissing and bubbling" (39). In this novel, "so-incisive telephoning" (154) marks the height of eavesdropping and espionage. As aggression intensifies in the late 1930s, noise escalates. Nancy Mitford's *Pigeon Pie* (1940), a novel about the "phoney war," is characterized by "horrid cacophony" and "songful propaganda" (29) that bellow incessantly over the wireless. Radios, constantly on, become the acoustic unconscious of the period.

The cataclysm of the First World War and its aftermath shook the polis and the artistic imagination irrevocably. Modris Eksteins in *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* argues for the intrinsic link between war and art—the significance of the Great War in the integrity and development of "modern consciousness" (xiii)—in the first half of the twentieth century, suggesting that there is a "sibling relationship" between the avant-garde and storm troops that "extends beyond their military origins" (xvi). Wyndham Lewis, in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), makes explicit "how like art is to war" (Lewis 4), particularly modernist art: both unsettle the residual social and cultural order that led the British Empire into the twentieth century. "With me," Lewis writes, "war and art have been mixed up from the start," and his book is meant to show "how war, art, civil war, strikes and coup d'états dovetail into each other" (4). Lewis, in his short-lived magazine *Blast* (1914-15), disdains the establishment by celebrating noise,

written into the title and showcased in the typeface of the journal. As avant-gardists suggest, the breaking up of the old order of things is bound to be noisy. Marina MacKay, in *Modernism and World War II*, makes this point explicit: “Modernism’s fractured and estranging modes simultaneously mimic the damage of war and blow to bits the lazy mental habits of mind that produced and sustained it” (9).

British modernists lament the “new” sounds that signal fragmentation and alienation. The dissolution of boundaries was not always met with applause. The initial performance of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* (1913) in Paris caused a brouhaha.<sup>1</sup> Intense, persistent noise can dissolve and shatter. T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, remains another keynote struck in this regard. As Juan Suárez argues in *Pop Modernism*, Eliot’s poem uses modern technologies such as the gramophone in imaginative designs and articulations: “The gramophone’s nondiscriminating ear explodes the queen’s English and places it in open competition with all other dialects and inflections, and with sheer noise” (Suárez 140). The conflict between modern noise and traditional culture is instantiated in D. H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* (1920) by Gerald’s brutalizing of his mare, already unnerved by the “repeated sharp blows of unknown, terrifying noise” of the passing coal train (168). In E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), traditional ways of doing things are gradually eroded by the encroaching sounds of modern industrialism: “London’s creeping,” Helen reminds her sister, as they sense their way of life at Howards End being “melted down” (329). In Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), the unknown noises of the “other” destabilize notions of the Western subject and his civilizing project. Noise and noise effects emerge

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<sup>1</sup> Eksteins, in *Rites of Spring*, considers Stravinsky’s ballet a paradigmatic example of the cultural forms and energies that combine in modern art and modern war.

more forcefully in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), authors who would amplify these effects in ensuing works that continue to depict the conscious mind reverberating with the historical resonances of the everyday. Paul K. Saint-Amour, in "Bombing and the Symptom" and "Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism," reads these two novels as emergent moments in the interwar drive to archive urban totality under the threat of erasure, an archive rife with noise.

Sound and noise have, of course, always been *there*, but the influences of cultural, media, and communications studies have broadened the landscape of inquiry and analysis. Studies of sound exemplify interdisciplinarity and crossover in the arts. The field has become so wide and so articulate in a considerably short period of time that no survey here will satisfy. The cultural history of sound is rich and, better still, getting louder. Some recent titles testify to the range and depth of this burgeoning field of study: *The Sound of Shakespeare*, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, *Victorian Soundscapes*, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, *The Auditory Culture Reader*, *A Manifesto for Silence*, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*. The influence of technology is paramount: Friedrich Kittler's *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is a landmark work in understanding reproductive and storage technologies, while Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* and *The Presence of the Word*, and Avital Ronnel's *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, direct our understanding of technology and media on the word. Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* remains the most impressive scholarly volume for its history of "audile technique" (23) and detailed recognition that "Sound history indexes changes in human nature and the human body" (12), putting the human being, more than the technology or the instrument, at the

“center of any meaningful definition of sound” (11).

Definitions of noise vary drastically, and it is a common denominator of sound studies to lament the lack of a consensus definition across the disciplines. R. Murray Schafer’s influential *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* suggests that “noise” can be an unwanted sound, an unmusical sound, a loud sound, and a disturbance in a signalling system (Schafer 273). “The most satisfactory definition of noise for general usage,” he writes, “is still ‘unwanted sound.’ This makes noise a subjective term. One man’s music may be another man’s noise” (273). Jacques Attali and Douglas Kahn take a more rigorous approach to defining noise, at times locating noise as an element of the avant-garde and attributing to it a profound political resonance. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Attali argues that as the musical process is the structuring of noise so our political process is the structuring of societies. Music and noise, he contends, are harbingers of cultural change because of their intimate relationship with power. “And since noise is the source of power,” Attali suggests, “power has always listened to it with fascination” (Attali 6). In *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, Kahn examines “significant sounds and significant noises” (4) across an array of disciplines and practices, and distinguishes between bruitism, simultaneism, war noises, music, rumour, visual noise, and silence in the arts. Noises are never just sounds; “they are also ideas of noise,” and these complexes of meaning can actually make the “audible event called noise louder than it might already be. Of all the emphatic sounds of modernism, noise is the most common and the most productively counterproductive” (20).

Recent criticism also indicates the importance of sound and noise to our



changing understanding of Anglo-American modernism. Charles Bernstein's *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* and Garret Stewart's *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* brought the focus in modernist studies back onto sound, while *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, edited by Adalaide Morris, and Craig Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible* have continued the trend. Critics such as Michael Coyle, James A. Connor, Melba Cuddy-Keane, and Bonnie Kime Scott have continued to analyze sound and technology in the work of H. D., Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot. In addition to Kahn and Whitehead's *Wireless Imagination*, recent studies of radio and wireless technology—*Radio Modernism* and *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi*—are drawing out the implications for literary modernism. Philipp Schweighauser's *The Noises of American Literature, 1890-1985: Toward a History of Literary Acoustics* examines the phenomenon and idea of noise in the development of American literary naturalism, modernism, and postmodernism. Suárez's *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* also focuses on the American context of noise and modernism, and discusses writers who both rejected and revelled in modern noise. My dissertation builds on these studies by focusing on later British modernism and war, and by turning to prose works by authors not immediately associated with modernist sound.

### **Mass Culture and Minority Culture**

While it marks the ruptures and breaks of historical and cataclysmic change, noise is also a sign of the quotidian. The avant-garde celebrate the sounds of dissolution. Luigi Russolo, in "The Art of Noise" (1913), praises noise as the "ear [becomes] more attentive than the eye" to the city symphony: "We will have fun imagining our

orchestration of department stores' sliding doors, the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundaries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways. And we must not forget the very new noises of Modern Warfare" (Russolo 7).<sup>2</sup> Most theorists of auditory culture claim that the volume of sound overwhelmed the modernist city dweller. Modernity, according to Juan Suárez, heralded an entirely new sound environment: "Urban agglomeration and widespread mechanization resulted in significantly increased noise levels, and in the introduction of unprecedented pitches, timbres, and rhythms—from the ring of the telephone to the roar of the combustion engine—into the quotidian soundscape" (Suárez 120).

The Futurist and Dada movements laud noise as a counter-sign to the dominant cultures of arts and letters during the first few decades of the twentieth century. The fragmentary experience of modernity is furthered by the prevalence of sound technologies and their reproductive effects: "Like the camera did in the realm of vision, telephones, phonographs, and radios detached sound from its original context and relocated it anew," expanding the horizon of the audible, multiplying exponentially the number of voices and utterances on the air, while revealing a parallel "aural unconscious" (Suárez 120, 121). Payer argues that rising levels of noise altered urban environments beginning at the turn of the twentieth century. Moreover, the discourse about noise among the middle classes in Vienna between 1870 and 1914 "camouflaged a class struggle, in which the middle classes strove to dissociate themselves from the so-called brute and unruly behaviour of the proletariat" (Payer 786). "Culture," according to

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<sup>2</sup> Russolo's art of noise turns on the tuning of the ear to the modern soundscape: "Thus the comprehension, the taste, and the passion for noises will be developed. Our expanded sensibility will gain futurist ears as it already has futurist eyes. In a few years, the engines of our industrial cities will be skillfully tuned so that every factory is turned into an intoxicating orchestra of noises" (Russolo 12).

author and anti-noise activist Theodor Lessing, “is evolution toward silence” (qtd. in Payer 781).

Noise provides a critical paradigm for literature of the 1930s and 1940s. Critics and writers employ the figure of noise as a challenge to the stability of culture. Proponents of high culture, as against mass culture, use noise as both a short-hand for contemporary degradations and as a means to amplify dissidence. Taking his turn at the proverbial “loud-speaking mechanism” to talk about the experience of war, Wyndham Lewis suggests in *Blasting and Bombardiering* that “the ‘big noise’ is in the main a phenomenon of mass-advertisement” (4). Both Leonard and Virginia Woolf focus on noise as critical factors in their mutual criticisms of the radio propaganda and fascist ideology in the late 1930s. While Virginia laments “the clamour, the uproar” (141) of the wireless voice that drowns out individual thought in *Three Guineas* (1938), Leonard employs a pun on “quackery” throughout *Quack, Quack!* (1935) to criticize the charlatanism of ideologues and their inarticulate noises: “The quack, quack of Herr Hitler’s Aryanism or Herr Kube’s hero-worship is the quack-quack of a goose,” he writes, “but in the quack, quack of the scapegoat hunters you can hear the sound change to the yapping of the pack that wants to taste blood” (105).

Cultural crisis had been a preoccupying force at least since Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), but the sense of crisis spread more widely in the 1930s. As F. R. Leavis points out in his pamphlet, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930), it is a “commonplace to-day that culture is at a crisis” (5). Leavis claims that the “desperate plight of culture” (3) is “more widely accepted than understood” (5); the first act of redressing the crisis is at the same time the first act of cultural criticism. Leavis argues

that the machinery of mass civilization and its concomitant noises threaten the maintenance of culture, defined here by specialized knowledges and practices. The developments and advancements of modern civilization, he suggests, do not bring forth progress, but rather decline. In response to the cultural crisis, Leavis directs the onus of protecting long-standing values and traditions to a minority:

Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction in which to go, that the centre is here rather than there. In their keeping, to use a metaphor that is metonymy also and will bear a good deal of pondering, is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By “culture” I mean the use of such a language. (5)

In Leavis’s estimation, culture depends on the careful manipulation of language. Spirit and fine living are nothing without it. The declining idiom is a result of the standardization practices and mass production techniques—the machinery of civilization—that compromise one’s ability to draw the distinctions of spirit necessary to the maintenance of finer living. According to T. S. Eliot, poetry enriches language by creating new connections and formations that eventually make their way into common speech, and thus “purif[ies] the dialect of the tribe” (qtd. in Collier 7). Leavis’s implicit contention and the purpose behind *Scrutiny*, the Cambridge-based journal of criticism he co-edited

throughout the 1930s and 1940s, is that balanced criticism, judiciously expressed, reduces the “noise” of mass civilization by moderating it. In Leavis’s terms, a minority safeguards culture whereas the masses perpetuate civilization, broadly conceived. In *Scrutiny*, he clarifies that this minority is not the elite avant-garde normally associated with that term; it is rather a critical cadre.

The lack of clarity and definition that Leavis identifies represents a kind of figural noise; confusion about “culture” is another sign of its decline. The inaugural issue of *Scrutiny* indicts an already flooded periodical market: “the age is illiterate with periodicals and no ordinary reasons will excuse an addition to the swarm. Policy, as well as honesty, demands that if we imagine ourselves to have a valid reason for existence, we should state it” (1.1: 2).<sup>3</sup> Aligning policy with “honesty,” the editors justify their entry into the field with “A Manifesto” in which to declare their intentions, motives, and views. The manifesto puns on “illiterate” by invoking a secondary sense of “to litter liberally.” R. H. Tawney, in the *Scrutiny* symposium on politics in 1939, suggests that a journal can “darken the atmosphere and add to the din by joining the ranks of the blowers off of steam” if it does not have anything worthwhile to contribute to politics (163). If *Scrutiny* is a platform, it is in danger of being used as an “additional vehicle for propaganda or system-mongering. The air is thick with birds of that feather, and the world deaf with their squawking” (165). Recalling Leonard Woolf’s use of the term “quackery,” the symposium associates noise with partisan politics, specifically putting the social in the

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<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, who re-launched *The Criterion* as a quarterly in January 1926, writes: “The existence of a literary review requires more than a word of justification” in order “to define the nature and the function” (*The New Criterion* 4.1: 1). To exist is not enough; an organism must serve a purpose: “A review should be an organ of documentation. [...] Even a single number should attempt to illustrate, within its limits, the time and the tendencies of the time. It should have a value over and above the aggregate value of the individual contributions” (2), and “must protect its disinterestedness, must avoid the temptation ever to appeal to any social, political or theological prejudices” (4).

stead of the literary: “Anarchy is in the saddle, with clap-trap as its herald” (165).

In *Modernism on Fleet Street*, Patrick Collier finds Leavis’s response to the rise of the mass press and the decline in reading habits indicative of the fears and anxieties many modernist writers share concerning the public sphere. “Leavis’s response,” Collier contends, “offers insight into what is at stake in these claims of a decline in reading habits: ‘Northcliffe showed people what they wanted, and showed the Best People that they wanted the same as the rest’. The concern for reading habits was underpinned by a fear of contamination of the ‘best’ by the ‘people’” (Collier 17). The spread of influence from below is figured here in terms of contamination, as something unnatural and unwanted because, in a sense, it goes against nature. Collier confirms 1922 as a crucial year because of the press baron Alfred Harmsworth’s (Viscount Northcliffe) death.

For nearly two decades cultural commentators had been arguing about steady decline in newspaper publishing from the Victorian traditions of “sober, restrained and responsible journalism” (Collier 1). According to Collier, the newspaper is the most “controversial medium of the age of modernism” because it was perceived to be impoverishing public discourse by emphasizing the sensational rather than shaping public opinion “with judicious restraint” (1). The flash layout of the mass modern newspaper made readers lazy, while content skewed values by creating a taste for passing fancy and sensation: “their infectious vocabulary of shorthand phrases threatened the very language itself” (1). But anxieties about the modern press channeled those about the masses and crowd behaviour, so that the issue was never simply one of language and culture, but of politics: “In 1922 a *New Statesman* writer suggested that newspapers, by reducing heterogeneous experience to catch phrases and the predictable poses of the

picture page, produced a form of automatism in readers, who speak ‘as if some kind of not very intelligent deity were ventriloquizing through them’” (Collier 15). This fear of being controlled by another—of being a ventriloquist’s dummy—is articulated in varying degrees throughout the period, and finds its logical equivalent in worries over the spread of propaganda, enhanced by technological saturation. The fear is class-based as well, of the half-educated masses rising in stature and political power and asserting self-determination to a never-before-seen extent, but also the understanding that whatever or whoever controls the media may well control the masses. The fear of contamination of a thinking minority by the noisy clamour of the masses positions noise as emerging from below. In this class stratification of noise, those on high wish to control and, if possible, silence, the cacophonous masses.

While F. R. Leavis promoted criticism as the way out of the modern muddle, T. S. Eliot derided the noisy argumentations put forward by mass newsprint. According to Eliot in “The Function of Criticism,” criticism should “always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste” (*Selected Essays* 13). “But,” he goes on, criticism turns out to be far from an “orderly field of beneficent activity” (13-14) and is instead “no better than a Sunday park of contending and contentious orators, who have not even arrived at the articulation of their differences” (14). Noise spreads where criticism should reign. The result is a climate in which common principles and values give way to “inner voice”: “If I like a thing, that is all I want; and if enough of us, shouting all together, like it, that should be all that *you* (who don’t like it) ought to want” (17).

According to many modernist writers, the noise of mass culture reverberates in

journalism. Eliot laments the sounds of “the confused cries of the newspaper critics” (7), and derisively figures journalism as ““enough of us, shouting all together”” (17), a sentiment echoed by Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) where he indicts “the journalists [who] do the shouting” (65). For Orwell, the Spanish Civil War portrayed in the worst way the power the media have over information, especially when journalism declines into the mere propagation of lies. The image of a roaring press is picked up by Leavis in the second number of *Scrutiny*, where he attacks the levelling-down processes of standardization. Reviewing, once a “critical” practice, has become an industry, wherein circulation and profit matter more than aesthetic merit and literary value, a “Literary Racket” in which magazine and newspaper reviews are mere “oil for the cogs of the publication machine” (1.2: 168). Minority culture is the preserve of quiet reflection and disinterestedness, immune to the political barking and illiterate desires of mass civilization.

Beyond political propaganda and public manipulation, noise voices anarchy. Cultural commentators from Arnold to Leavis insinuate that anarchy and noise share a fundamental grammar. As with language, the grammar of noise is generative: noise gives rise to more noise. In *The Perennial Philosophy* (1945), Aldous Huxley diagnoses noise as the chronic issue of his day. According to Huxley, social, cultural, and technological noises penetrate the conscious mind from all directions.

The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire—we hold history’s record for all of them. And no wonder; for all the resources of our almost miraculous technology have been thrown into the current assault against silence. That



most popular and influential of all recent inventions, the radio, is nothing but a conduit through which pre-fabricated din can flow into our homes. And this din goes far deeper, of course, than the ear-drums. It penetrates the mind, filling it with a babel of distractions—news items, mutually irrelevant bits of information, blasts of corybantic or sentimental music, continually repeated doses of drama that bring no catharsis, but merely create a craving for daily or even hourly emotional enemas. And where, as in most countries, the broadcasting stations support themselves by selling time to advertisers, the noise is carried from the ears, through the realms of phantasy, knowledge and feeling to the ego's central core of wish and desire. Spoken or printed, broadcast over the ether or on wood-pulp, all advertising copy has but one purpose—to prevent the will from ever achieving silence. (218-19)

Noise irritates and distracts. It disturbs serenity and breaks silence. The assault on silence is built up alliteratively in Huxley's condemnation of the penetrative quality of modern din. Huxley zeroes in on the moral costs of noise as a cipher for mass civilization and its consumptive ethos, which he calls "universal craving" (219). "Desirelessness" and, by analogy, silence, mark the "condition of deliverance and illumination" (219), conditions made obsolete by the pervasive racket of modern culture.

Huxley's criticism of the Age of Noise emphasizes the spiritual costs of a culture overblown with noise, pointing to the abuses of "miraculous technology" as a principal cause. Social, political, and technological noise irritate the individual to a point of total distraction. More like Gordon Comstock and less like George Bowling, Orwell's

protagonists in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) and *Coming Up for Air* (1939), Huxley focuses on the link between noise and the culture industry at the expense of the link between this noise-filled, streamlined civilization and war—an odd silence in 1945. Noise limits thought (“I can’t hear myself think!”). In this regard, noise is anathema to Arnold’s definition of culture as “the best that has been thought and said” and to Leavis’s understanding of it as the use of language and idiom upon which “fine living” depends. Huxley bemoans the imposition of other forces on the individual mind because it prevents the individual will from asserting itself and determining autonomous subjectivity. Those forces take the shape of the media and the masses to which they cater and, potentially, which they indoctrinate. The politics of this is borne out by Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell, who all suspect modern technologies of leading to more control over thought than is desirable.

Technology, as Huxley mentions, is an essential element to the production of noise and its tendency to distract. The technologies of noise, like the technologies of culture and media, interpellate the subject in new, sometimes disturbing ways. Radios, telephones, machines, gramophones, loudspeakers, sirens, and bombs clang in modern soundscapes: some enable and enhance communication, mobility, and thought; others disrupt, disturb, and destroy. Some technologies even take the place of basic amenities by becoming them. According to Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), “twenty million are underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio” (82-83). With the infusion of “miraculous technology” into the domestic and public spheres of the nation throughout the 1930s, hearing and listening (the one principally physiological, the other mental) undergo substantial change.

Changes to urban organization reshaped the city soundscape and prompted residents to think differently about sound. The creation of suburbs, the mass conversion of houses into blocks of flats, and the stocking of homes with domestic machinery (vacuums, radios, refrigerators, telephones, gramophones, and, later, televisions) reorient public and private acoustic space. George Bowling, in Orwell's *Coming Up for Air*, bemoans the streamlined and stifling suburban life, which was all "mixed up with the noise of the radio" (22). Emily Thompson's *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002) discusses the profound changes that domestic and architectural technologies wrought in the first few decades of the twentieth century in America. As Thompson notes, developments in noise-reducing construction materials to keep urban cacophony out of architectural interiors grew alongside electroacoustic technologies and technicians who engineered spaces to maximize reverberation and thereby transform the experience of listening in space. The soundscapes of Elizabeth Bowen's novels are rife with overhearing and significant sounds, sounds imbued with political and psychological significance, and sometimes violence, as in *The Last September* (1929). She cues her readers to listen for these motifs, and she designs scenes around unusual acts of listening, as when Stella Rodney reads during an aerial bombardment so that anticipation—hers and the reader's—dominates the experience of war in *The Heat of the Day* (1949).

Bowen's works emphasize how technology provides the means to explore the epistemological and psychological effects of modern noise. Some of these technologies and standardized cultural products are made more effective by the subjects who use them; others are marked by a ghostly, almost unconscious agency that signifies a cultural and psychological otherness. The telephone in *The Death of the Heart* (1938) functions as

an “electric fence—friends who did not first telephone did not come” (109). The telephone, like the radio and loudspeaker, has the ability to intrude, as in Bowen’s short story turned radio play, “The Confidante” (1923, 1943), in which Hermione is forced to break from her conversation with Mr. A to answer the phone: “But otherwise, wouldn’t it go on ringing?” (n.p.). To answer the ringing bell of the telephone is to be called up and positioned in particular social networks. Bowen’s representations of the infiltration of technological noise into the domestic sphere reach their climax in her novel of the blitz, *The Heat of the Day*, where domestic spaces are reduced to rubble; they can no longer reverberate with sound of any kind. How a house sounds, how it privileges certain voices while muting others, speaks to the theme of hospitality in her writing. In *The Last September*, one could argue that sound is a *character* in the novel that oscillates between hospitality and hostility.

These increasingly standardized technologies—in particular the radio—mark a major shift not only in the immediacy of sound, but also in the proximity of an event. The noise of technology redefines the individual. In November 1939, Virginia Woolf bemoaned in her diaries “the ravings, the strangled hysterical sobbing swearing ranting of Hitler” and the clamour of lies on the radio: “There’s no getting at truth now all the loud speakers are contradicting each other” (*Diaries* 5:245). In Christopher Isherwood’s *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), Hermann Goering is heard on a radio at a street corner exhorting Germans to the Nazi way: “Germany is awake, he said,” and nothing could quiet the “loud, angry voice of the Government, contradicting through its thousand mouths” (263, 264). Radios were public and people were expected to listen, especially to political broadcasts, sometimes with the help of “Wireless Wardens” whose duty it was

to prevent one from “switching off” (Balfour 20).

Hitler, when it came to broadcasting, was reported to have been “an ineffective speaker who shouted at the microphone instead of wooing it” (Balfour 19). Hitler’s noisy broadcasts stand metonymically for his aggressive aims across the European frontier, what Ezra Pound calls “Hitlerian yawping” (127) in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935). The publisher Fredric Warburg points to the acoustic equivalency when he laments the mid-1930s as a time when Hitler, the “madman with the raucous voice,” “was ranting his way through Europe and Chamberlain [was] whispering appeasement into ears only too open to receive it” (*Occupation* 141, 150). “Without the loudspeaker,” Hitler would boast, “we would never have conquered Germany” (qtd. in Attali i). Crowds are drawn together as much by visual spectacle as by auditory wonder. As Jonathan Sterne points out in *The Audible Past*, the radio formed a kind of “audile collective” (167).<sup>4</sup>

But auditory technology also emerges with disturbing effects. Orwell’s characters—Flory and Bowling, for example—bemoan the incidence of the gramophone at every turn, an instrument Orwell would employ in his other writings as a metaphor for propaganda and thoughtless ideologues: “gangster-gramophones” (159), as he calls them in *Homage to Catalonia*. In Bowen’s *The Last September*, the gramophone functions as a kind of objective correlative of the delicate political balance of the Anglo-Irish occupancy during the Irish Troubles, which is ultimately “*upset*” (157). Angela Lyne experiences a similar breakdown in Waugh’s *Put Out More Flags* (1942) as she listens compulsively to foreign broadcasts during the Phoney War. Charles Ryder, in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945),

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<sup>4</sup> Sterne includes a cartoon in his discussion of audile technique and the radio that depicts its soothing, pacifying affects as opposed to its creation of racket and din: “the characters in the cartoon make all sorts of noise until they are quieted—alone together—by the radio set in the living room. The crowd becomes the mass right before our eyes in the Sunday paper” (166-67).

curse the wireless as a harbinger of the death of the old and ringing in of the Age of Hooper, out of whose earshot he cannot get. Winston, of course, suffers a much worse existence under the watch and bark of the telescreen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Technological noise antagonizes, disturbs, and terrorizes. I. A. Richards, writing in 1943, suggests some technological advances can lead to more confusion and war: “The plane, after the war, will mix us all up to a degree we have not yet imagined. The radio mixes us up already. And the radio has already been a chief instrument in cultivating those sentiments—of exclusive loyalty to the group, of disloyalty to the planet—which plunge us into wars. It is indeed these technological innovations, or rather their misuse, which we are suffering from” (Richards 6).

### Noise and the Uses of Language

Noise also inflects the sentence. The epistemological efficacy of language was central to cultural debates in the 1930s. Grammatical noise compromised the purity and possibility of communication. Noise and language are as antithetical as they are interdependent, but language can be manipulated in ways that create noise effects. C. K. Ogden reduced the English language to 850 words and developed Basic (British American Scientific International Commercial) English, which he justified in *Debabelization* (1931) as not only derivative of the most habitual uses of English, but also the easiest and most functional shorthand, “designed for mechanical transmission, by telephone, gramophone, talkie, and radio” (Ogden 155). In one sense, the intention of the language supplement is to reduce the potential of noise in mechanical transmission: “Its phonetic system should be such as to make it intelligible with a minimum of

ambiguity on the telephone, phonograph, and radio” (157). Ogden’s belief in the potential for Basic to create an international community elicits his praise for a speech Mussolini would deliver on the radio in 1931 in “the ordinary English of journalists and men of letters” (117), in which the dictator justifies the Italian Fascist way. Ogden praises it as a “gracious compliment to the English tongue” (117) and a “Gospel of Peace” (118). In Ogden’s view, the medium really is the message. But Basic, and other language systems like it, is perceived by critics as not only culturally and semantically deficient, but also conducive to the kinds of advertising copy and propaganda that discomfited many late modernists.

Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell place language under considerable stress in order to emphasize the inherent incursions of noise into social and literary discourse, and the political implications of each. Both Waugh and Orwell parody minimalist languages and the ambiguities, disruptions, and negations of meaning that they can entail. Likewise, Bowen experiments with the intriguing languages of espionage and culture in *The Heat of the Day* and in her short stories. Her penchant for contorted syntactical structures in that novel, often aimed at capturing the knots and twists of meaning during the uncanny wartime atmosphere, prompted even her publisher to question their value. Bowen confirmed their importance for containing the proper “psychological impact” and giving the more “*sounding* position” to a certain word or phrase, and understood that her syntactical arrangements would “jerk or jar—to an extent, even, which may displease the reader” (Letter to Daniel George, HRC 10.4). Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell incorporate the sounds of the quotidian, of daily life, into narrative in ways that inject it with shocks and noises, an impulse more realist than it is modernist. As Suárez suggests, “Noise

travels through modernist literature as it does through the media” (Suárez 134). While high modernism has received the label of (unnecessarily) “difficult,” often these incursions come most readily when what one encounters is merely unfamiliar and foreign.

Travelling abroad, particularly in the 1930s, took the tide of anthropological and ethnographic study to far away shores and remote places. Foreign languages and cultures combined to increase perceptions of the noise of the other. The journalist getting the latest scoop, as Waugh parodies in *Black Mischief* (1932) and *Scoop* (1938), often involved the use of what became known as “journalese” or “cablese,” language telegraphed and minimized for economy and impact. Waugh’s own experiences as a correspondent in the 1930s fuelled his cynical portrayals. When the unwitting William Boot is sent to Africa to get the scoop, he finds the messages wired from his employer, the *Beast*, wholly unintelligible: “OPPOSITION SPLASHING FRONTWARD SPEEDILIEST STOP ADEN REPORTED PREPARED WARWISE FLASH FACTS BEAST” (68). A minimalist muddle without conjunctions and other integrating units of speech to create a grammatical whole, the code—a parody of Basic—can be deciphered only by experienced journalists like Corker (69-70). Adorning the employer with a name like the *Beast* and the Boot-Corker team a “telegraphic name” like “UNNATURAL” (69), Waugh mocks the inherent noise not only in these debased forms of language use, but also in the clashes of civilization and barbarism.

The noise of language achieves a perfectly horrid pitch in Orwell’s indictment of Basic and the ethos of thought control it transmutes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Language represents the most far-reaching system of power relations in the novel. Big Brother’s



Newspeak is intended “to *diminish* the range of thought” of its users, and in its overall design “euphony outweighed every consideration other than exactitude of meaning” (313, 321). Semantically ambivalent words such as *duck-speak* not only denote “to quack like a duck,” where speech issues “from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all,” but also engender judgment: if the quacking is of orthodox opinions, then the word is given in praise; if not, the term is given as abuse (322, 57). The duckspeaker from whom Winston Smith cannot escape in the canteen is a poignant example of the noisiness of newspeak and illustrates, like the sheep-bleating chorus in *Animal Farm* (1945), the way in which noise is reified by power. Both show how contradiction finds acoustic equivalency in totalitarian language and thought, where the noise of totalitarianism is figured as issuing from the larynx only and not from the brain. Newspeak, as well as the doublethink that it engenders, marks the culmination of the modernist desire to “make it new,” albeit in a corrupt and ideologically menacing form.

The experience and representation of noise is inherently political. In Waugh’s novels and travel writing, noise articulates an anarchy that threatens the stability of civilization and the integrity of culture. In *Robbery Under Law* (1939), a travelogue about Mexico, Waugh documents latent fear of the anarchy of mob rule, where traditions and established values are subject to overthrow, willy-nilly. Waugh does not find the same vibrancy in noise from below as Orwell does; faith in positive change and renewal does not lie, for Waugh, with the “common” man, only with the individual.<sup>5</sup> Orwell, while placing his hopes in the socialist reform of the class system from the bottom up, also

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<sup>5</sup> Toward the conclusion of a feisty interview with the BBC, Waugh clarifies his position on the common man: “I clearly can’t make myself understood. There is no such thing as a man in the street. There is no ordinary run of mankind, there are only individuals who are totally different. And whether a man is naked and black and stands on one foot in Sudan or is clothed in some kind of costume in a bus in England, they are still individuals of entirely different characters” (qtd. in Brown n.p.).

expresses considerable reserve over the efficacy of revolutionary change in Britain. The paradox of strident masses kept quiet by the cheap palliatives of modern civilization does more than irk Orwell in his writings. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston believes the revolutionary potential of the proles made apparent by their raucous behaviour counters the noise of the telescreen and is, ultimately, uncontrollable and anarchic—fit to overthrow the totalitarian order of Big Brother. He recalls walking through the marketplace and hearing “a tremendous shout of hundreds of voices—women’s voices,” a “cry of anger and despair, a deep loud ‘Oh-o-o-o-oh!’ that went humming on like the reverberation of a bell. His heart had leapt. It’s started! he had thought. A riot! The proles are breaking loose at last!” (73). Winston hears power in their vagrant sounds. “And since noise is the source of power, power has always listened to it with fascination,” writes Attali (6). The exclamations of excitement seem uncontainable, much like the electric current that flows through members of the Party during Two Minutes Hate. The problem, however, is precisely that: the noise is anarchic, without direction and without purpose. The “general despair broke down into a multitude of individual quarrels” (73), and Winston is left disappointed, pondering the paradox in silent solitude: “*Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious*” (74).

The sounds emitted by everyday speakers can be not only noisy, as with screams and shouts and quarrels, but also accented with class differences. Noise separates elite and popular notions of culture. The noise of a football match lacks resonance in elite culture, which takes as its aesthetic the “best that has been thought and said in the world.” According to a contributor to “The Claims of Politics” symposium in *Scrutiny*, in

“a world increasingly noisy, standardized, obvious,” the person with “developed cultural interests” is able to “slip round the corner out of the noise of the circus” (8.2: 133).

Culture is distinctly a minority endeavour and ideally a private, quiet affair, one intimately linked with bourgeois leisure. The sense of avoidance, of escaping from the raucous crowds and the racket of modern civilization, lends these comments an anti-Marxist timbre. Moreover, when writers quote the noise of a crowd, like the demonstration in James Barke’s *Major Operation* (1936), they draw attention to competing notions of culture, allusions that are as social as they are literary.

In the socialist novels and documentary prose works of the 1930s, the masses are marked by their thronging and riotous behaviour.<sup>6</sup> The working classes, going about their daily lives, always come together with a confused roaring. In *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *The Road to Wigan Pier*, reportage crosses the boundaries between journalism and literature as part of an emergent model of culture and a burgeoning documentary tradition that take noise as a mark of authenticity, wherein the culture of the people is rendered through the “clatter of pots and pans, or the much more rhythmic beat of machinery ... the strange, peculiar muffled clanks and deep-toned clatters of a mine” (*Left Review* 1.4: 129). Encouraging working-class writers in *Left Review* to put their experiences into narrative, Amabel Williams-Ellis suggests that the sought-after effect is “to make the reader feel as if he or she were actually there” (129). Though Christopher Isherwood’s narrative strategy in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) foregrounds the “camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (9), the narrative cannot put in

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<sup>6</sup> Publication of the English translations of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) and José Ortega y Gasset’s *The Revolt of the Masses* (1932), together with the immense work of the Mass Observation project, bring forth the masses as proper subjects of psychoanalytic and sociological discourse in the 1930s.

parenthesis the “call” that is “sure to sound, so piercing, so insistent, so despairingly human” (10) that riddles the prose of the 1930s.

Though critics have made much of Orwell’s sensitivity to the smell of the working classes in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, none picks up on his sensitivity to sound: “The first sound in the mornings was the clumping of the mill-girl’s clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear” (3). While Orwell echoes those initial morning sounds (fricative c’s and ghostly w’s) in an overtly literary construction, he can only testify to the a posteriori sounds he hears, not the anterior factory whistles that summon the working classes to task. Attending to such noises marks the documentarian as an ear witness. But it also marks him as an outsider, an observer and a listener. In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the Rue du Coq D’Or is riveted at seven in the morning by a “succession of furious, choking yells from the street,” thereupon “a whole variegated chorus of yells, as windows were flung open on every side and half the street joined in the quarrel” (1). Later, Orwell describes a London scene that is strikingly more aural than visual, culminating in angry “heckling” and “a confused uproar of voices” (136). The scene captures an important trend in the 1930s, namely the movement of narrative down into the places of daily life and out into the streets. Specifically, documentary isolates quarrels and shouting as phenomena of class.

As much as noise demarcates class, it also represents the opportunity to overcome those structures by recognizing their essential fluidity. The Second World War and the realist novels of the blitz would bear out the rising tides of patriotism, nationalism, and unity. In war noise, which targets all persons regardless of class, there is

the potential for a nation that transcends prejudice to come into existence. Everyone is subject to bombardment. The passing of the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act in May 1940 brought Britain under martial law, as Clement Attlee told the nation on the radio: “Parliament has given to the Government full power to control all persons and property. There is no distinction between rich and poor, between worker and employer; between man and woman; the services and property of all must be at the disposal of the Government for the common task” (Attlee 1036). While hardly instituting totalitarian measures of the sort incubated in Orwell’s stark *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the sweeping acts of government to mobilize a nation toward a single purpose can bring about disturbing results. In the dystopian world of Big Brother, the ideal is fanatic unity: “all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans” (77). Orthodoxy and dissent might, in fact, come with indistinguishable pitches. Propaganda and information share many traits; it is only the intent to persuade, to deceive, to influence, that tells them apart. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell hopes for and finds, for a time, the longed-for socialist ideal made real—a classless army fighting fascism in Spain. But these firmly held socialist ideals cannot withstand the fragmenting and fear-mongering bark of the propagandist and the whisper of a bullet.

As technology reorients the relationship between the masses and the centres of power, fears that technology spreads the noise of doctrine emerge. Though propaganda can come in an array of forms and articulations which need be neither noisy nor loud, propaganda in the 1930s is often characterized in precisely these terms. Hitler, Goebbels, and Lord Haw-Haw are infamous examples of auditory demagoguery, as against the measured tones of Chamberlain’s declaration of war. The intimate relationship between

the loudspeaker and mass politics makes manifest the intercourse of technology and propaganda. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, technology reorients the politics of culture when the radio negates its own content: “The gigantic fact that the speech penetrates everywhere replaces its content, just as the benefaction of the Toscanini broadcast takes the place of the symphony. No listener can grasp its true meaning any longer, while the Führer’s speech is lies anyway. The inherent tendency of radio is to make the speaker’s word, the false commandment, absolute. A recommendation becomes an order” (159). Mass politics irritated conservative individualists like Waugh to no end. Waugh grumbles about this unpleasant effect of mass civilization and politics when he criticizes the ways in which crowds of people are swayed by the shouts of Mexican politics in *Robbery Under Law* (906-7). The threat of turning into a ventriloquist’s manikin as a result of propaganda lends an aptly acoustic vehicle to the metaphor of mind control.<sup>7</sup>

Propaganda and noise share a grammar of power. In Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a distinctly postwar novel, culture *and* propaganda become state-sponsored institutions. According to Jacques Ellul, “Propaganda dissolves contradictions and restores to man a unitary world in which the demands are in accord with the facts” (159). He means that propaganda relieves individuals of doubt and uncertainty—while relieving groups of crises and contradictions—because it creates only obvious choices. Winston Smith undergoes this in grueling detail, where illogicality and contradiction become truth with mathematical certainty ( $2 + 2 = 5$ ). In this way, culture is a site of contest and struggle, itself a propagandized instrument for ideological ends. The work of propaganda

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<sup>7</sup> The fear is all the more intense in the 1930s because control issues from below, or as Leavis put it, the “Best People” find themselves wanting the same as everybody else (*MCMC* 8).

(resolving contradictions) resembles the work of culture (resolving crisis). Mark Wollaeger, in *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda*, argues that modernism and propaganda share their coming of age with one another, both amplifying and providing solace from the disenchantments of modern civilization (xiii).

Though writers intensely debated the epistemological and aesthetic merits of literature as propaganda, they also worked out these issues thematically. Wollaeger suggests that “Both modernism and propaganda raise the problem of the separation of form from content; both try to make meaning effective through ambiguity” (xiv). Later modernists, engaging in documentary forms of realism and reportage, attempted to close this gap, and by so doing to alleviate anxieties over ambiguous intent. A chief rhetorical strategy in this is the authenticity and legitimacy that comes with bearing witness to circumstances and events first hand; moreover, a good listener knows the difference between the real and the phoney, truth and falsehood, information and propaganda. Listening to noise, as Attali notes, is listening to the vibrations of power. Orwell offers his reporting-persona as an apt listener to the noises and political ideologies of Civil War-torn Spain in *Homage to Catalonia*. From the shells and bullets that volley back and forth between armies to the shouts and slogans of rival factions, Orwell discerns the meaning of the conflict for English readers. The book culminates in a final caution: the war in Spain against fascism will lead to war in Britain against fascism, unless the reader heeds warnings that sound abroad.

## War

When Chamberlain declared war in 1939, many Britons did not know what to

expect nor how to discern whether the ensuing air-raid alarms signalled real fear or something simulated—phoney, but nonetheless real.<sup>8</sup> Fredric Warburg begins his second volume of memoirs on this historical moment: “On September 3, 1939 my wife and I sat down at 11 a.m. to listen to the long-awaited broadcast of Neville Chamberlain. Immediately afterwards, the air-raid sirens screamed. ‘That,’ said Pamela, ‘is the most *real* sound I’ve heard for years.’ She stood up and looked out of the window at the sky. It was no doubt a day for the long horizon and an end to double talk. ‘This,’ said Pamela quietly, ‘is the end of my youth. I shall never be young again’” (*Authors* 1). For the Warburgs, the notes struck in declaration and alarm are immediately meaningful, demonstrative (Pamela’s “That” and “This”) in fact. For many more, the declaration of war ended hopes for political consensus or civilization, even modernism; critics have only recently begun to move beyond all those “endings” in 1939. Evelyn Waugh takes the events of that morning as the central motivation behind his 1942 satire of the nation at war, *Put Out More Flags*. While writers left home and travelled to the Spanish Civil War in order to record its “hellish noise” (*Homage to Catalonia* 118), the Second World War and blitz of London brought the sounds of war from the air to the home.

Novels about war—about the fear of war and the war of fear—proliferate in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Spanish Civil War captured the imaginations and, in some cases, cost the lives of many British writers and artists. The Second World War cost even more as the aerial bombardment of London and other cities prompted the emergence of the blitz novel: realist, hallucinatory, and often highly self-conscious of their mode of

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<sup>8</sup> The point is made especially forcefully in the 1940 propaganda film aimed at audiences in the U.S., *London Can Take It!* (later renamed *Britain Can Take It!*). When the anti-aircraft artillery opens upon the spotlighted sky, the voice-over confirms: “These are not Hollywood sound effects.”



representation in the modernist vein. The intensity and proximity of sound increases one-hundred fold during times of war, whether one is a combatant on the front lines, or a citizen on the home front amidst the ongoing devastation. In Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, the narrator notes the ways in which internal shocks and disasters can be overcome by taking in the enduring quality of things, their "imperturbableness" and "air that nothing has happened," such as furniture: "the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the spirit than the destruction of human life" (270). Losing one's home, having one's things blown "into smithereens" by a "dropped bomb" (270) are instantaneous cataclysms to the comforts and continuities of civilization.

The acts of listening that define the 1930s suddenly shift in radical ways during the blitz. Technological noise would become an ambivalent signifier for trauma and recovery during the period. Paul Saint-Amour has written about the traumatic "earliness" encountered in cities under aerial bombardment. In "Air War Prophecy and Interwar Modernism," Saint-Amour argues convincingly that the false alarm "mobilizes anxiety without providing it with a kinetic output," or the catharsis of an actual attack (Saint-Amour 140). "Thus," he continues, "the very falsity of the alarm emphasizes a condition of hideously prolonged expectation, a state of emergency that is both perennial, in having been detached from the arrival of violence in a singular event, and horribly deferred—the advance symptom of a disaster still to come" (140). Though he means early-ness (a word that gains resonance from its proximity to "eerie-ness"), the proleptic quality of the air-raid and the anticipation of trauma which nonetheless constitutes a traumatic experience whether bombs fall or not, the word implies the intensification of the ear as a

factor in the perception and experience of trauma for citizens of the bombing city. The notions of “earliness” (early and ear) and “anticipation” that Saint-Amour uses in his readings of trauma and the modernist city under aerial bombardment suit both blitz novels and other novelistic treatments of air-raids because the phoney and the real can have the same traumatic effect. Once emergency becomes routine, he writes, “The disaster that arrives and the disaster that may be about to arrive have equal powers here to engender a ‘collective psychosis’; the real war and the rehearsal for war become psychotically indistinct” (Saint-Amour 131). Orwell’s Gordon Comstock and George Bowling both have auditory hallucinations of air-raids that exemplify this traumatic earliness. The air-raid siren pierces the surface of reality in such a way that everything that follows is experienced as real, whether bombers follow overhead and the next sound is the catastrophic one of explosives or the relief of an All-Clear. A Mass-Observation File Report (21 October 1940) documents the widespread “non-use of ear plugs, mainly because people want to listen to possible death” (FR 464). Tom Harrisson (13 November 1940) comments on the “psychological difficulties” that were caused by “the noise of bombs and guns. But it was not only the noise itself; listening for the noise proved to be of great importance” (FR 489: 1, 2). “Nothing essential happens in the absence of noise,” writes Attali (3).

In *The Heat of the Day*, the sounds of outdoor music, radio broadcasts, pealing church bells, planes and bombs vie for dominance with the subtle tinkle of broken glass, blacked-out silence, and exchanges of secret information and confession.<sup>9</sup> The incursion

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<sup>9</sup> Dylan Thomas’s unpublished radio script “The Art of Conversation: A Lecture with Illustrations & Moral” addresses similar themes with considerable comedy. The February 1940 poster campaign in Britain to curb “careless talk”—“careless talk costs lives”—instituted a social blackout on gossip. In Thomas’s script, noise

of war noise into daily life is not only rendered in narrative, but carries its own syntactical consequences, as Bowen's alliterative prose runs its own "broadcast-echoing course" through a glissade of bombs during the London blitz, until "On and off, on and off sounded the sirens in the nightmare sunlessness" (371). Bombs connect disparate points in the city: "Now down a shaft of anticipating silence the bomb swung whistling ... The detonation dulled off into the cataracting roar of a split building: direct hit, somewhere else" (104). Attuned to the historical trauma of war, Bowen marks the space between here and there—"The unexpected-expected day, with its feeling of elsewhere"ness"—through noise (371). Keith Williams makes much of this notion of "else-awareness" (17) as a trademark of 1930s sensibility and writing, but he attributes it to the effect of the media on writers' consciousness and fails to heed its significance in the literature of the blitz. The blitz brought down walls and joined Londoners in a shared experience of trauma. Bowen captures the paradox of life under bombardment, such that its hallucinatory quality and gritty realism share the same material presence. Bowen's development of this "else-awareness" in the 1940s—something other blitz novelists imagine—locates the experience in terms of war consciousness, the paradox of the "unexpected-expected."

By June 1944, when wave after wave of flying bombs and rockets droned overhead, the British were growing expert at listening. "These weapons had," Warburg

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operates as censorship. The "lecture" is on the decline of English conversation, as snippets of conversation are heard between historical figures, at first, and ordinary people, thereafter. Whenever information slips out that might be of use to the enemy listening in, a loud gong sounds. While noise—chatter, murmuring, rustling—defines the acoustic background, noise also operates as censorship, until the talk breaks down: "Oh, do be quiet. Do be quiet, darling," a young man implores, "Don't talk so much. Everybody talks too much (*almost shouting*). Every body talks too much. Don't talk so much. (*the whispering, the chattering, the gossiping rise to climax*)" (13). Andrew Lycette uncovered the manuscript (c. June 1944) and brought it to light in *The Guardian* (21 June 2008).

admits, “in every sense of the word, an impact on my publishing affairs” (30). Looking over Regent’s Park to the south, Warburg and his wife watched the nightly attacks time and again: “Soon we became expert at judging where each one fell. We could trace the direction on a map of London and estimate the distance by counting the number of seconds taken by the noise of the explosion to travel from its point of impact to our ears (1,100 feet a second). It was a grim calculation, and one with a terrible fascination” (31). If the bomb blast missed, the noise carried its detonation home. Unfortunately for Warburg, his office was finally hit, and the confirmation of his worst fears of the previous night came with a haunting image of the telephone stripped of its ability to make, or carry, noise, its industry interrupted: “Through the crazy wreckage of a window-frame hung a red plastic telephone, mine, mutely revealing that business was no longer to be as usual” (31). Though the instruments of modern noise would continue to exert their presence, the higher violence of the air-raid siren and the bomber overhead would come to dominate the novels of the London blitz.

While the dissolution of boundaries formalized in modernist literature no longer remained an experience of the minority by the end of 1940, the terror incurred by excessive noise and violence altered the material landscape of London. Hitler and the German army capitalized on the terror associated with noise with the Stuka diver bombers (*Sturzkampfbomber* or *Sturzkampfflugzeug*) and the V1 and V2 rockets. Noise was weaponized. The terror of noise is evident in the diving-whistle of the Ju 87 Stuka diver bomber, which was used considerably in the early stages of the Blitzkrieg on Polish and French targets. Hitler ordered the planes to be equipped with a siren that made the noise of its dive far more frightening, thereby increasing its terror on enemy civilians and

soldiers. The V1 rockets (“doodlebugs,” “flying bombs,” “buzz bombs”), which appeared in June 1944, were identified by their characteristic “buzz” produced by the pulse of its propulsion system and the sudden silence as it cut out before falling to impact.

The V2 rockets, which appeared in September 1944, were supersonic, creating only a telltale fading whistling sound *after* they exploded on impact. Because the rockets were undetectable, British air defence was at a loss how to respond in a timely fashion. These bombs were even more disconcerting to the civilian population because they were silent; people had grown accustomed to the noise of the buzz bombs. In fact, citizens of London were not even aware that V2 rockets were falling on them until 10 November 1944, when Churchill announced them in parliament. Moreover, disinformation was passed to the Germans about sites of detonation in order to divert the rocket attacks to less populated and less strategic targets. Orwell’s rocket attacks in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—“Steamer!” (87)—resemble the V2s; silent, they “supposedly travelled faster than sound” (87). Silence, like noise, becomes a weapon. Both incite fear.

Don Ihde, in the second edition of *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, describes how the sudden absence of sound can disembody cinematic images. Commenting on *The Battle of Britain*, “a technicolor reenactment” of the battle over England during the Second World War, Ihde notes how the soundtrack for the film cuts out at the decisive battle: “Amid the loud chatter of the machine guns and the roar and sputter of the airplanes the sound track is suddenly and deliberately silenced. At the instant of the disappearance of animating sound, the scene becomes eerie, a moving tableau that becomes more abstract and distant. This momentary irreality of the

disengagement of sound allows the battle to be seen as a strange dance without music.

Emptiness which can be uncanny is silence in the auditory dimension” (Ihde 83).

Winston Churchill records the immensity of silence that swept over London on 3 November 1940, when the Germans moved their blitz targets to industrial centres. These attacks culminated in the night of November 14 when Coventry was devastated by heavy bombing and the verb “to Coventrate,” meaning to devastate sections of a city by concentrated bombing, entered the vocabulary of savagery and war.

Noise, in some sense, authors meaning. Orwell took this to heart when he generated the paradoxical vocabulary and grammar of Newspeak. I am tempted to argue that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* signals the end of modernism, for if modernism is marked by a radical self-consciousness at all levels of the literary text, and by the fragmented experience of modernity, then Orwell’s novel details their obliteration at the same time as it pitches their perfection. Big Brother authors all meaning, including dissidence. The basis of the renovation of modernist subjectivity emerges in the confusion and ambiguity of conceivably stable distinctions: civilized and savage, modern and primitive, public and private, consciousness and unconsciousness, subject and object, this class and that. Spurred by Freud’s hesitation over the value of civilization and the neurosis spawned by its processes, critics of mass culture find its techniques and technologies of production and politics disarming of the individual and tending only to total war. The thematic preoccupation with the modern dissolution of boundaries is carried forward by the second-generation writers I discuss. Bowen represents the dissolution in both positive and negative terms, and moves to the forefront of her 1940s writing the concomitant need to hold things together. Waugh’s satires and ironic representations of the

contemporary social and political scene revel in the demise of traditional cultural values—as his anti-hero Basil Seal, who profits from this loss, epitomizes—if only to intensify their absent lament. Orwell takes this idea to its logical end in his final novel, where the noise of total government overwhelms Winston such that the fraught nature of modernist subjectivity is instead evacuated and replaced by the iconic imposture of Big Brother.

Rather than declare an end or death of modernism, critics have overturned new terms to describe the literature of the 1930s and the 1940s. Tyrus Miller in *Late Modernism* and Kristin Bluemel in *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics* coin the terms “late modernist” and “intermodernist,” respectively, to describe these modernist-yet-not-modernist literary projects of the 1930s and 1940s: on the one hand, resolutely modernist in design and effect, reproducing and modifying the themes and concerns prevalent in British literature since the First World War; on the other hand, not strictly modernist with respect to form and style, such that experiments with modes of realism deal less with the abstract fragmentations and dissolutions brought about by the incursions of modernity and more with particular historical events and political realities.

Bluemel’s term, “intermodernism,” is immensely valuable because of its flexibility of definition and, when loosened slightly, its inclusiveness. I would alter her definition to downplay the “radical eccentric[ity]” (2) of the writers who fall within its scope. Yet Bluemel identifies a body of writing that does not fit readily into dyads like modernism and postmodernism, and that is not readily delimited by period, political, and group dynamics. For Bluemel, intermodernist writers emerge from or are in productive contact with “working- or lower-middle-class cultures,” and often hold down “regular jobs”

while moving in circles generally outside the privileged Oxbridge networks (5). When intermodernist writers do experiment with form and style, “their narratives are still within a recognizably realist tradition” and they veer away from “that archetypal modernist impulse toward mystic epiphany (Lawrence) or mythic allusion (Joyce or Eliot)” (5). Bluemel attributes this “realist bias” to the journalism many of these writers undertook over the course of their careers: “The intermodernists’ social marginalization, financial dependence on jobs and freelance journalism, and debts to realism often resulted in writing that attends to politics, especially politics that may improve working conditions” (5).

“Intermodernism,” according to Bluemel, “contributes to what F. R. Leavis famously called England’s minority culture, but it also cheerfully partakes of and contributes to the mass culture Leavis distrusted” (6). Bluemel’s definition captures the ethos of much writing during the 1930s and 1940s, and particularly the work of Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell. Bluemel stresses that “inter” indicates a “connection or bridge between at least two other territories” (6). She further suggests that intermodernism is “best thought of as a kind of writing, discourse, or orientation rather than a period that competes with others for particular years or texts or personalities” (6). As a companion term, Tyrus Miller’s “late modernism,” has its value. Though she finds the term “faintly paradoxical” (MacKay 15) and questions some of Miller’s political blindspots, MacKay does find late modernism valuable for addressing the “move away from the manifestos of the 1910s and the climactic year of 1922,” to focus instead on “development and transformation. Focusing on late modernism is a way of reading modernism through its longer outcomes rather than its notional origins” (15). Miller sees late modernist writing



as a “distinctly self-conscious manifestation of the aging and decline of modernism, in both its institutional and ideological dimensions” (7), likewise positioning it between modernism and postmodernism. Miller places the emergence of late modernism around 1926, and thus alongside high modernism. Like Bluemel after him, Miller sees late modernist writing as a distinct type that turns away from the “strong symbolic forms” of high modernist texts and more towards “the work’s social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses” (20). Together with his key theoretical concepts of generalized mimeticism, self-reflexive laughter, and the weakening of symbolic form, Miller identifies several basic features of late modernist literature. These works present a “deauthenticated world” in which basic distinctions (between subject and object, for example) are weakened and disrupted (62); “minimal ‘positionality’ of the authorial subject” such that neither a stable ground of values nor formal orchestration is projected (63); “self-reflexive” or “mirthless” laughter meant to shore up a “subjectivity at risk of dissolution” (63); a “major loosening of symbolic unity” (63); the predominance of “grotesque bodies” producing self-reflexive laughter (64); “an obsessive depiction of pure corporeal automatism” (64); and, a “subjectivity ‘at play’ in the face of its own extinction” such that a “mortifying jolt” may yet still “stiffen and preserve” (64).

Bowen, Orwell, and Waugh, all born within five years of each other, are second-generation modernists. They share modernist and realist concerns of representation and expression: with language, narrative, point of view, consciousness, humour, violence, cruelty, and grace. They share differing degrees of conservatism in both their political outlooks and their aesthetic projects. They imagine similar worlds to those represented

by Lawrence, Conrad, Joyce, Woolf, Lewis, and Eliot, but with a profound difference: they *internalize* the lessons of their predecessors while they *externalize* a political world both imagined and real. The result is a provocative fiction that registers the demands of the historical real through an otherwise individuated consciousness. In the 1940s, all three heroized the individual even in the face of dubious circumstances. In other words, the politics of the individual are paramount; not in the sense of choosing sides, of getting on this side of the barricade or that, but rather the way in which consciousness is inextricably bound to the political and social forces shaping history. Noise signals this change.

Late modernist or intermodernist writers in general responded to the changes in the modern soundscape, which in turn reflect deeper and at times more subtle shifts in the cultural makeup of Britain. Later modernist writers of the 1930s and 1940s incorporate these noises into their texts, and charge them with critical functions and cover them with shades of meaning. In my first and second chapters, I discuss the social and political resonances of noise in Elizabeth Bowen's novels.<sup>10</sup> Her fiction, layered with sounds and silences, depicts noise as a political phenomenon, particularly in *The Last September* and *The Heat of the Day*. Throughout her works, however, Bowen represents the incursion of technology into daily life through unusual sounds and significant silences, where structures of being and sociality are modified, amplified, and muted. Bowen's works are, I argue, audible terrains.

In my third and fourth chapters, I consider the critical importance of the culture

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<sup>10</sup> "Just as in an air raid, if you were a warden, which I was, you stomp up and down the streets making a clatter with the boots you are wearing, knowing you can't prevent a bomb falling, but thinking, 'At any rate I'm taking part in this, I may be doing some good'" (HRC 2.3). [Radio Interview, 1959. With John Bowen, William Craig, and W. N. Ewer. BBC Broadcast, 11 September 1959. Transcription HRC 2.3]

racket to Evelyn Waugh's novels and travel writing of the period, and particularly the value of noise to this satirist's arsenal. Noise assumes a negative if highly comedic value in his work, one that captures the essential ambiguity of what it means to be modern. Most notably, *Vile Bodies* (1930), *Robbery Under Law*, and *Put Out More Flags* represent noise as the engine of modern technology, political and social anarchy, media and war. The chapters engage with technological noise, travel noise, and phoney noise in Waugh's writing in order to rethink his auditory dissidence.

In my fifth and sixth chapters, I examine the politics of noise in the work of George Orwell. From *Down and Out in Paris and London* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell interrogates the politics of noise in relation to colonialism, propaganda, and war. Though Orwell begins associating noise with the working classes, by the 1940s these associations include the middle classes as well. Documenting noise as he does in his travel writing and reportage, Orwell brings the modernist reader into contact with elements typically foreign to literature. Creating protagonists alienated by their environments and social orders, Orwell also signals that the current course of civilization is growing increasingly alarming. The politics of noise are pitched perfectly in Orwell's two novels of the 1940s. The conclusion to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* posits a protagonist in whose mind individual thought no longer echoes. O'Brien, the high priest of Big Brother, turns Winston's mind into an anechoic chamber, where silence is the ultimate erasure, equivalent to death.

Arthur Schopenhauer complained that "Noise is the most impertinent of all forms of interruption" and a "disruption of thought" (128).<sup>11</sup> Noise demands meaning

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<sup>11</sup> He considered noise an affront, a "violent interruption" (128) of the mind's work and a "torture to intellectual people" (127). The tolerance of noise, and not just its production, is distinctly a trait of the lower orders: "The general toleration of unnecessary noise—the slamming of doors, for instance, a very unmannerly

and revelation of purpose at the same time as it overwhelms sense with the basest of intent. Mass Observation noted repeatedly during the blitz that Londoners, though issued ear plugs, chose not to wear them: “No, I wouldn’t want to wear earplugs. I want to hear” (FR 464: 2), was a common refrain. Noise can bring people together, as much as it can divide them. “When we heard a bang going in the distance, we used to say: ‘Some poor devils got it.’ That’s what we used to say. We were in that big affair down at \*\*\*\*\* Road. It fell just tree [sic] houses away. It’s a funny thing, you don’t hear any noise with them. Just the lights went out and everything fell in on us” (FR 2207: 4). Noise is a sign of complaint and unrest; but sometimes that is the only way for someone to hear, and to take notice.

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and ill-bred thing—is direct evidence that the prevailing habit of mind is dullness and lack of thought” (132). Schopenhauer was tried for harming his neighbour, who made too much noise.

## Chapter One: Elizabeth Bowen's Audible Terrains

"The Bowen terrain cannot be demarcated on any existing map." ~ Elizabeth Bowen<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen considered herself to be a "visual writer" (*Pictures and Conversations* 60). Critics corroborate this view. Allan Hepburn suggests that "Bowen is manifestly a writer of intense vision" (*Intrigue* 154). Heather Bryant Jordan writes that Bowen conceived of herself as "a painter *manqué* who was 'trying to make words do the work of line and colour' in her writing" (xiv). Yet Bowen is also an auditory writer, attuned to the vibrations of sense and the tremors of language. She had a remarkable ear for diction. The rhythms of her syntax and dense turns of phrase record a rich psychological and phenomenal soundscape. Bowen imbues narrative with unusual noises and unsettling silences that convey symbolic meanings as often as they complicate interpretation. Although Bowen characters are saturated by noise, they do not always care to listen.

Bowen's thinking about noise and silence evolved throughout her major novels of the 1920s and 1930s. Noise and silence harbour political struggle in *The Last September* (1929). In *To the North* (1932), *The House in Paris* (1935), and *The Death of the Heart* (1938), noise attests to domestic discontent and upset. These novels resound with the tumult of history and register social catastrophe in its minutest quivers. The effects of modernity on social life are her principal concerns; she focuses on not just political conflicts and reformations, but also the ways in which modern technologies (telephones, gramophones, radios, bombs) and modernist techniques (narrative uncertainty, shifting

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<sup>1</sup> In *Pictures and Conversations* (1975), published posthumously, Bowen writes: "I am not placed: I do not qualify. The Bowen terrain cannot be demarcated on any existing map; it is unspecified. Ireland and England, between them contain my stories, with occasional outgoings into France or Italy: within the boundaries of those countries there is no particular locality that I have staked a claim on or identified with" (35).

points of view, deliberately awkward prose, radical self-consciousness) reconfigure the relationship between self and other, present and past.

A major reconsideration of Elizabeth Bowen's oeuvre has been the subject of much recent scholarly criticism. Phyllis Lassner was among the first to provide a critical reassessment of Bowen's novels and short stories according to the politics of gender, race, and nation. A host of subsequent full-length studies have reconfigured Bowen's cultural impact principally through the lens of war (Jordan), psychoanalytic theory and the linguistic turn (Bennett and Royle), and historically among her contemporaries and her time (Corcoran and Ellmann). Shorter, though equally insightful examinations of thematic concerns fill out the critical picture: war and propaganda (Piette, Medoff, Parsons, Rau), espionage and love (Hepburn), blindness and knowledge (Watson), Anglo-Irish politics and history (Lassner, Williams), language and narrative (Chessman, Dukes, Caserio, Kitagawa, Hopkins), tradition and social change (Coates, Miller, Kiberd), innocence and experience (Colt, Warren), cultural codes and gender (Coates, Coughlan), and memory and perception (Adams, Concilio). Many critics point to significant sounds and silences in Bowen's writing, but none develops a coherent reading of Bowen's audible terrains.

Noise is an integral feature of Bowen's fiction, which combines realist and modernist modes of representation and narrative. Some noises are wholly peculiar to one text, such as the reverberating bomb effects in *The Heat of the Day*. Others happen again and again, such as ticking clocks, blaring radios, ringing telephones, and immense silences. Sounds enunciate Bowen homes. In *The Last September*, the quiet architectural acoustics of Danielstown, ideal for eavesdropping, are disturbed by the grate and groan

of the marauding Black-and-Tan lorries. Techniques of listening and overhearing are replayed in new ways through the complex characters and narrative structure of *The House in Paris*. In *The Death of the Heart*, Windsor Terrace and Waikiki—and to a certain extent the Fisher’s home in *The House in Paris*—have distinct soundscapes. The imposing silences of Windsor Terrace are opposed by the ruckus and blaring wireless that define seaside Waikiki in *The Death of the Heart*. Noise and silence are distinguishing characteristics of the architecture of each home, and play a part in the hospitality, or hostility, encountered within. Not every sound in Bowen’s acoustic *mise-en-scène* is a noise; sounds and silences have meaning, but not all of them are wanted by the characters who perceive them. Bowen’s fiction registers the inheritances of modernism and the cultural impact of modern technology. Modern instruments and acoustic technologies elaborate and complicate social networks while creating uncertain narrative echoes. Her language brims with expectation like a teakettle on the verge of boiling over.

Bowen incorporates noise as a stylistic principle in her work. Syntactical convolutions, semantic uncertainties, and un-orthographic words create jarring and unnerving sentences that snap meaning and escalate affect. For example, Bowen deploys the un-emphatic double negative, and makes conspicuous use of the “un-” prefix throughout *The House in Paris* to produce doubling effects: “Unbright” (22), “unobscured,” “ungreatness” (196), “undoubled” (197), “unalarmed,” “unstruggling,” “unchangingly” (198), “unchildish” (201), “unmovingness” (202), and “unobtrusively” (212). In *To the North*, Emmeline is distracted with thoughts of her lover, Markie, and seems rattled by the noise of her office: “just now she could only think of the ten toads, terribly tired, trying to trot to Tetbury—she was appalled. Her roll-top in its solemn

surround of silence was a monument to the pretence of industry: in vain her stenographer's pointed tapping, in vain the clock: place and time, shivered to radiant atoms, were in disorder" (161). Alliteration mocks Emmeline's vain distraction. Neil Corcoran suggests that it is the "vibrating force" of Bowen's unconventional style and language which "precedes everything else in her" (4).<sup>2</sup> But she also blends modernist forms and styles with social consciousness and that resurgent sense of duty in the 1930s to represent things "as they really are." Bowen considered her books her relation to the social world, and her style can expose a stark, unveiled portrayal of it.

The social networks that provide the essential drama of Bowen's narratives both rely on and are undone by instruments of communication, which just as readily produce din and disruption as they do connection. In *The Last September*, the gramophone serves as a vortex of the unspoken forces that threaten to unsettle the landed gentry, an objective correlative for the deep emotions that underlie the precarious political balance that threatens to spill over with violence. In *The Death of the Heart*, some homes encourage noise through domestic technologies, as the blaring wireless does at Waikiki, while others distill a controlled quiet, as the room-to-room telephone conveys in Windsor Terrace. The intercom and telephone get in the way of feeling and expression in that novel. Domestic and transportation technologies in *To the North* become sinister, conduits for breakdown and crisis, entropy and death. The roar of the aeroplane's engines in *To the North* makes conversation impossible, if only to be outdone by the "immense idea of departure" (TTN 325) that overtakes Emmeline while Markie shouts

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<sup>2</sup> Corcoran responds to critics who complain of Bowen's style as "mannerism" by quoting Bowen's description in *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (1962) of her "unyielding refusal of the obvious" in favour of "the affray of words, the vibrating force of their unforeseenness" (Corcoran 3).



invectives at her in the death-dealing motor car at the end of the novel. The desire for quiet, as Bowen's 1930s novels intimate, is a desire for death.

### The Politics of Silence in *The Last September*

*The Last September*, an "autopsy of Anglo-Irish civilisation" according to Maud Ellmann ("Shadowy" 8), is an historical novel set during the Irish Troubles circa 1920, a period marked by reciprocal violence and bloodshed between the British-led Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC, the "Black and Tans") and the Irish Republican Army (IRA, the "Irish Volunteers"). The civilian population, both Catholic and Protestant, loyalist and nationalist, suffered reprisals from opposing paramilitary organizations. In particular, the IRA targeted the Protestant Ascendancy (wealthy landowners), many of whom were murdered. Nearly 300 homes were burned by the IRA and the marauding Black and Tans, stocked mostly with British ex-soldiers from the First World War. The Anglo-Irish, and the perplexities of their hyphenated identity, stood at the centre of the conflict.

Though Bowen pulls a thin drape in front of the simmering violence in *The Last September*, she eloquently brings out its menace in the interstices of noise and silence. While the patrolling Black and Tans are defined by their aggressive noise, the IRA are an invisible, silent menace. The Anglo-Irish Naylor's avoid the political situation at every turn, and never speak directly about the conflict. Caught between contradictory desires and allegiances, they voice neither. Violence ripples across the narrative. When the English Mrs. Vermont and her lunch party are left waiting at Danielstown, she quibbles: "when one thinks these are the people we are defending! I wonder if they'll offer us any coffee. What I think about Irish hospitality: either they almost knock you down or they

don't look at you" (195). While noise emerges tinged with hostility in *The Last September*, silence betokens hospitality that, to some, is equally hostile. Because of the absence of direct political discourse among the residents of Danielstown, they resort to eavesdropping or shouting. Listening in on one another violates private spheres, and resembles the invasive sounds of the Black-and-Tan lorries to residents. "Unlike conversation," Ann Gaylin suggests, "eavesdropping represents unlawful intervention and transmission" (16). Sound marks territory but it also ignores boundaries. Noise manifests the underlying tensions that the quiet way of life represses at Danielstown, until the balance is upset and the family home is engulfed by flames.

Bowen alerts readers to the agency of sound in the novel by announcing the "sound of a motor" as it approaches Danielstown (7). "About six o'clock," the narrator begins, "the sound of a motor, collected out of the wide country and narrowed under the trees of the avenue, brought the household out in excitement on to the steps. Up among the beeches, a thin iron gate twanged; the car slid out from a net of shadow, down the slope to the house" (7). The twang of the iron gate draws attention to the "thin" barrier that the gate provides to dangers lurking beyond its perimeter. The narrative concentrates on the approaching sound funneled by the landscape, drawing the Naylor's out of their home in a state of agitation. As the Montmorencys are met, "Two toppling waves of excitement crashed and mingled; for moments everybody was inaudible" (7). The exhilaration of meeting brings a rush to fill empty spaces and silences, in addition to a sudden incomprehensibility. These waves and flows of sound are repeated during the Rolfe's dance and at the conclusion of the novel. Both moments reverse the trajectory of sound, establishing a pattern of violence. As the title suggests, this September will be the

last.

The Big House, Danielstown, looms large in *The Last September*, and Bowen imbues it with an architectural integrity that sanctions political quietism. Phyllis Lassner points out that “Bowen portrays Danielstown as an analogue to its inhabitants’ emotional and political blindness, suggesting that the house’s apparent omniscience reflects its owners’ narcissism” (“Past” 45). Danielstown mutes discourse: “The distant ceiling imposed on consciousness its blank white oblong, and a pellucid silence, distilled from a hundred and fifty years of conversation, waited beneath the ceiling. Into this silence, voices went up in stately attenuation. Now there were no voices; Mrs Montmorency and Laurence sat looking away from each other” (20). The house distills silence, not discourse. Danielstown de-amplifies sound and swallows up the noise of its residents. Carmen Concilio contends that silence is like a “character in the novel,” a “figure which stands for the immobility of the history and social situation, and is at the same time the prelude to the forthcoming catastrophe” (284).

The extraordinary quietness of Danielstown is only an internal condition, however, and peace is threatened by civil unrest. As night “held the trees with a toneless finality” and the house towered “with toppling immanence, like a cliff,” Francie Montmorency recalls nothing “so quiet as evenings here” (30). Danielstown fosters hospitable silence. While the group discusses plans for a tennis party, Francie is the first to notice an intrusive noise that punctures their serene evening with a shock: “She had so given herself to the silence that the birth of sound, after which the others were still straining, had shocked her nerves like a blow. [...] Far east, beyond the demesne: a motor, straining cautiously out of the silence. A grind, an anguish of sound as it took the

hill" (30).<sup>3</sup> When one has grown so accustomed to silence, noise erupts like violence. In this case, violence is suggested by the source of the sound. Both Laurence and Hugo Montmorency identify the source of the emotive "anguish of sound," and Hugo even "reached out and pressed a hand on to Francie's rug," translating for her: "Patrols" (30). Noise is never neutral. Later, Lois and Livvy encounter a lorry on patrol replete with drunken soldiers: "At this point they heard a lorry coming. Black and Tans, fortified inwardly against the weather, were shouting and singing and now and then firing shots. The voices, kept low by the rain, the grind of the wheels on the rocky road, tunnelled through the close air with a particular horror" (75). The noise of the lorry forewarns residents. Lois and Livvy, hiding off the road, felt "exposed and hunted" (75) as the lorry grinds off down the road.

The encroaching noise threatens more than the physical boundary of Danielstown. Noise is invasive, and the ear only too hospitable. "The sound paused," the narrator describes, and then "moved shakily, stoopingly, like someone running and crouching behind a hedge. The jarring echoed down the spines of the listeners. They heard with a sense of complicity" (31). Stalking the cultured quietness of Danielstown, the noise of the lorry is figured as a hunter or soldier on evasive maneuvers. Gerald Lesworth, the British soldier who courts the Naylor's niece, Lois, corroborates the sound-image when he admits that he is in Ireland to hunt and shoot the Irish (93). Unlike eyes that can be averted or closed, the ears have few defenses against unwanted sounds. Moreover, the "jarring" noise shoots down the central nervous systems of its

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<sup>3</sup> Though one can still hear the glissando in the gear changes of large tractor-trucks today, in the 1930s and 1940s the sound of buses and lorries could, at times, approximate a siren. In an August 1940 Mass Observation report, it is noted that "nine persons out of ten mistook cars changing gear for air raid warnings" (FR371: n.p.).

listeners. Their complicit hearing is more than a physical fact; it is political. The Anglo-Irish are disturbed by the aggressive sound as much as they are responsible for its dangerous presence. They both sponsor and suffer under the British occupation—both “*hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy,” Jacques Derrida suggests, and thus caught “between hospitality and hostility” (Derrida 15). Hence, while they cannot but hear the noise and register its irritant, they do not acknowledge its “anguish” as a notification of political instability.

When discussion does arise over the purpose of the patrols, the conversation is quickly muted. Describing the way the lorry draws along the outskirts of Danielstown, the narrator suggests that “It seemed that the lorry took pleasure in crawling with such a menace along the boundary, marking the scope of peace of this silly island, undermining solitude. In the still night sound had a breathlessness, as of intention” (31). Anthropomorphized, sound is a predator. To Laurence, the unpredictability of the lorry marks its meaning: “A furtive lorry is a sinister thing” (31). Lady Naylor, however, disagrees, and finds no trace of hostility in the roving patrol. Were it not to be misconstrued as merely decorous, as fake hospitality, she would “ask the poor fellows in to have coffee” (31), as if an open-door policy could negate the threat of being intruded upon, turning the threat of their visitation into an invitation.<sup>4</sup> The lines, then, between hospitality and hostility are blurred: a false display of hospitality is, ultimately, hostile. Before political recognition of this surfaces, however, Sir Richard Naylor ends the discussion by striking out with “one of his major chords” on the status of the tennis courts (31). With patriarchal loudness, he

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<sup>4</sup> In “Hostipitality,” Derrida discusses the difference between “visitation” and “invitation,” the one with an open-door policy and the other without (15). The “invitation defines conditional hospitality” because it is on the “condition that I receive him,” whereas “unconditional hospitality” of visitation implies that the “visitor is someone who could come at any moment, without any horizon of expectation” (17 n17).

establishes social leisure and tennis as fit subjects of discussion, not politics.

The “furtive lorry” eventually moves beyond earshot and silence resumes its hold over Danielstown, but a trace of the disturbance is left behind. The narrator describes how the “lorry ground off east towards Ballyhinch; silence shifting down on its tracks like sand. Their world was clear of it and a pressure lightened. Once more they could have heard a leaf turn in the trees or a bird shifting along a branch” (31). The noise of the lorry cut through the acoustic landscape, a violation not only of the Naylor’s peaceful evening with their guests, but of nature as well. Silence and sand might follow at the heels of the colonial marauders, but the soundscape has changed: “Silence healed, but kept a scar of horror” (33). Nature is altered, put off kilter. Indeed, the narrator describes a bird that “shrieked and stumbled down through the dark, tearing the leaves” (33) as Lois creeps about the wooded grounds later that evening by herself. The image of a bird crashing down through the branches delivers a prevailing sense of gravity and foreboding.

Moreover, into the silence left in the wake of the grinding lorry steps an IRA militiaman, “powerful as a thought” (34). While the Naylor’s and guests hear but do not see the lorry, Lois, out wandering in the woods, sees but does not hear the lone Irish Republican soldier traipsing in the dark: “First, she did not hear footsteps coming, and as she began to notice the displaced darkness thought what she dreaded was coming, was there within her—she was indeed clairvoyant, exposed to horror and going to see a ghost” (33). As the man passes by, uncannily, Lois does not speak to him: “Quite still, she let him go past in contemptuous unawareness. His intentions burnt on the dark an almost visible trail; he might well have been a murderer he seemed so inspired” (34). The

IRA are silent and invisible—less physical, it seems, than a forceful combination of ideas, emotions, and intentions. Lois cannot connect with him because she cannot “conceive of her country emotionally” (34), rather only in detachment. Lois wishes to share her brush with midnight nationalism, but realizes that her revelation would fall on ears deafened by the cultured, abstracted silence of Danielstown, and goes off to bed, “uncivilly” (35). Marda and Lois stumble upon an IRA soldier hiding out in a disused mill later. Marda is shot in the hand, but almost as soon as the noise makes its “rings in the silence” (126), the soldier disappears.

The aversion to direct political discourse in the novel is born out by the extensive eavesdropping that occurs in Danielstown. Eavesdropping, Ann Gaylin argues, “represents a process of acquiring secret knowledge about self and other” (1). When intentional and not inadvertent, illicit or “hidden listening involves the deliberate invasion of a private space” (Gaylin 7). Laurence is a great eavesdropper, always sticking his head out of windows to overhear (160). When Lady Naylor and Francie discuss Gerald’s evident affections for Lois, Lois cannot help but overhear them. Lady Naylor disdains the noise being made over the notion that ““this country’s unsafe”” (57) and Francie’s report that people are gossiping about Lois and Gerald. Taking a political angle on an otherwise social concern, Lady Naylor derides gossip as ““a very great danger, I think, to the life of this country”” (57). Making her opinion of Gerald’s shortcomings clear, Lady Naylor requests that Francie ““contradict”” any further gossip on the subject (59). When Francie offers up a final comment on Lois, she is interrupted by a sudden noise in the adjacent room: ““Because Lois is so very— ’ Here she broke off, scared by a terrible clatter in Lois’s room. A pail had been kicked and some furniture violently

shifted" (59). Lois, eavesdropping, has had enough and brings an end to the conversation. "Listening covertly," Gaylin suggests, "can undo a sense of self" (10). Lois does not want to know what she was, for "knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round lifelong inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler?" (60). The adjective is too intelligible to Lois to bear, so she blocks it out by creating a sudden racket that alerts the two women they are being overheard. Covert listening ends in the near-revelation of self-knowledge for Lois.<sup>5</sup> The principle of listening in, the elicit activity of overhearing in this context, blurs the boundaries between the public and the private; it constitutes an invasion of privacy, which reflects back upon Lois in the most inconvenient ways. What is otherwise private is made public.

Gerald and Laurence discuss the political situation, but the conversation is rough and ultimately cut short. The conversation resituates Gerald's public, anonymous duty, as he sees it, into the private sphere. In the hall, Laurence stops Gerald, offering him a cigarette and mild conversation, only to break in with "Do tell me: did you kill anybody?" (91). Laurence, cutting to the chase, presses Gerald for his "point of view" (92). Taken aback, Gerald stumbles around the belief that what the English occupying force are doing in Ireland is ultimately "right," though the "situation's rotten" (92). Gerald makes a gaffe by assuming that his notion of right and wrong is the same as Laurence's and that they both stand on the side of "civilization" (92). Laurence, however, assures Gerald that he is "not English," after which he ends the conversation

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<sup>5</sup> In another instance, Lois and Daventry's conversation is interrupted by the broken gramophone at the Rolfes' dance. Daventry intimates that he wishes to discuss Gerald with Lois, but never completes his sentence. Lois, greatly disturbed, deliberates on his speech, placing stresses of meaning on each of Daventry's three words: "*Our* young friend, our *young* friend, our young *friend*" (158). Here too, the narrator assures the reader, "she wasn't to know" (158).



abruptly. As they move to rejoin the others, Gerald is too “shocked” to speak: “Their conversation, torn off rough at this edge, seemed doomed from its very nature to incompleteness. Gerald would have wished to explain that no one could have a sounder respect than himself and his country for the whole principle of nationality, and that it was with some awareness of misdirection, even of paradox, that he was out here to hunt and shoot the Irish” (93). But rather than say this, Gerald remains silent. He justifies the violent irony of his own nationalism and barbarity from the point of view of civilization. Laurence believes that genuine politics prevails by logic, such that Gerald’s paradoxical presence reveals itself as an error. Rather than express their contrary views, however, characters withdraw at the moment of contact.

Since characters do not address the deteriorating political situation, instability manifests itself in objects and sounds. These two elements converge in the gramophone. Phyllis Lassner argues that “As the characters retreat from each other, passion and rage are expressed only through the spontaneous explosion of objects. Balloons explode, a gramophone is upset, and a room throbs as though it would burst” (43). The scene of the dance is one of the more darkly comical in the novel, one in which the gramophone articulates the political unconscious. The gramophone enables distraction and allows the Anglo-Irish to neglect the severity of the deteriorating political situation. The gramophone emits its own forgetfulness. During the dance, Lois and Gerald bicker about the rising tension between them. Gerald suggests that Lois should not have left him behind to “talk rot” with her family while she “went off with that beastly gramophone” (152). Conversations before the dance are less about the usual boy-girl discomfort, however, than they are about the threat posed by the IRA militiamen who

may ambush the event. The gramophone leads the dance with an agency of its own:

“The gramophone spurted hoarse music; other couples followed the gramophone” (143).

Placing “the gramophone” at the beginning and ending positions of the sentence, it dominates; human will is eliminated. The imperfect technology of playback during the period is a likely explanation for the “hoarse” sound it emits, but it also recalls the grind of the lorry. The gramophone is a vulgar version of Eliot’s “objective correlative,” the object containing the formula for not only emotions and desires, but also political wills.

The gramophone, a repository of unconscious political desire, infects the dance as much as it makes its avoidance of an awareness of political crisis possible. Unlike the image of the embodied silence of Danielstown encircled by noise, the Rolfes’ hut is marred by its internal noise: “The Rolfes’ door swung open and shut; bursts from the gramophone came downhill like somebody coughing” (148). Prefiguring its collapse, “coughing” indicates illness. Its intermittent notes are echoed in movement by the sentry who “inhumanly paced like a pendulum” out front of the house, for, the narrator notes, the “country bore in it strong menace” (153). The noises issuing from the home are almost a taunt to the Irish militia. A few balloons burst—Moirá wonders if it is a ““bombardment”” (155)—and the narrator issues a knowing warning: “If they were not careful, they would knock over the gramophone. Mr Daventry thought it was time they did. It was time something happened” (155).

Daventry predicts the gramophone’s demise because he is the only character who intuitively feels the damage being done by the British occupation. Daventry dances feverishly at the party, but “whenever he stopped dancing he noticed that he had a headache” (144). He dances with everyone, but his real partner is the gramophone. Shell-shocked from his

service in the First World War, Daventry represents the cultural memory of war, a legacy Europe has laboured to forget. Daventry faces the difficulty of his duty, and dislikes it. Given orders that day to look for guns with special instructions “to search with particular strictness the houses where men were absent and women wept loudest and prayed,” Daventry is fatigued from his distasteful duties and “felt sickish, still stifled with thick air and womanhood, dazed from the din. Daventry had been shell-shocked, he was now beginning to hate Ireland, lyrically, explicitly; down to the very feel of the air and smell of the water” (144). The narrator’s synæsthetic description emphasizes Daventry’s imbalance, such that only whiskey and social distraction, he admits, keep him sane. Several critics read Daventry and Gerald as doubles for one another, passing by each other during the dance with a “queer silent interchange” (153). But Daventry is more a double for the gramophone; both are tuned into the political situation, and both are on the verge of toppling over.

The knocking over of the gramophone is, then, tantamount to the spilling over of the political into the social. Hostility infects hospitality. Daventry and Lois make small talk—he intimates wrongly, though nonetheless intently, that Ireland is “Hers”—until their common interest, Gerald, surfaces in the conversation, when suddenly the gramophone suffers an untimely death: “But the roar of merriment, solid and swerving evenly as a waterfall past the door, splintered off in a crash. Silence came, with hard impact. ‘Thank God, *they’ve upset the gramophone!*’ Daventry smacked his knee, remotely, as though rehearsing the gesture. His look decomposed in laughter. ‘Done in,’ he said, drawing life from the thought. Simultaneously, a universal shriek went up: it was smashed, finished. ‘Really,’ she thought, ‘you laugh like Satan!’” (157). Chaos permeates

the description, as if the world had turned upside down. Daventry's ghoulish laugh and "decomposed" look situate him as the conductor of chaos, and Lois feels him look at her like a "ghost" (158). Between bursts of laughter, Lois laments the fallen instrument: "A gramophone passing, a gramophone less in the world, it was not funny" (158). It is funny, but the ramifications of the disruption are dire.

The overturned gramophone prefigures Gerald's death and exacerbation of national crisis. Lady Naylor addresses the fallen gramophone upon Lois's return to Danielstown, demanding to hear more about it as "these things are always remembered" (163). Because the Gunners' gramophone is broken, they are obliged to get a new one. Gerald is on his way to Cork (198) to obtain a new one when his company is ambushed and he is killed. Moreover, the news of Gerald's death is described so as to echo descriptions of the Rolfes' party: "It crashed upon the unknowingness of the town like a wave that for two hours, since the event, had been rising and toppling, imminent" (198). The metaphor for the travelling news shifts to the wind, but by the time it reaches the Rolfes' hut, the wave takes hold again: "They all felt naked and were ashamed of each other, as though they had been wrecked. From the hut floor—where they had danced—the wicker furniture seemed to rise and waver" (199). The waves also are in echo of the opening of the novel, and they will be recalled again at its end. Mrs. Rolfe, distraught by the news, asks of the gunshot that killed him: "Didn't anyone hear anything, any firing? I mean, didn't it make a noise?" (199). The IRA even strike in silence. Her question comes as if, had they heeded the sound, Gerald might not have been killed.

When Gerald and Lois finally address their relationship, the distance between

them is considerable. As Gerald stands confused, “like a foreigner with whom by some failure in her vocabulary all communication was interrupted,” the six-o’clock bell begins to ring in a “jerky, metallic passage of sound through the plantation” (190). Lois shouts at Gerald, but they are caught in “twists of conversation knotted together. One can’t move,” as Lois puts it, “one doesn’t know where one is” (191). As Gerald leaves, Lois calls after him, but “by this time he seemed to be out of ear-shot” (192). A sentence with an eerily similar structure announces the news of Gerald’s death: “They heard an early bugle shivering in the rain” (200). Like some kind of disturbing carry-over from the “done in” gramophone, their relationship is “done in” by the tolling bell. Communication between the two is severed.

The narrative concludes with the “death—execution rather—of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel,” all in the same night (206). Like the ritual burning of dead leaves in the autumn—when Danielstown, everyone agrees, “looks really its best” (205)—the homes that symbolize the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy are razed. Since this is the last September, however, renewal, for the Anglo-Irish, is not in promise. It seemed to those looking on that “the country itself was burning” (206). Like the seasons of the year, everything returns—so with the narrative. This time, the sound reverses direction, spreading out centrifugally, as cars pull away from the Big House: “At Danielstown, half-way up the avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened, gave itself to the open and empty country and was demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps. Above the steps, the

door stood open hospitably upon a furnace" (206). The house, as Julia Williams suggests, seems to "accept and even welcome its destruction" (235), its final act of hospitality steeped in hostility.

In contrast to the lorries, which lumber and grind through the landscape, these executioners slide out "bland," perhaps even diplomatic. But the "anguish" of sound that accompanies the lorry is reconstituted in the iron gate swinging "aghast," providing the pathos to the horror witnessed that the Naylor's themselves cannot seem to express, lost, as they are, in silence: "Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly" (206). Their silent reserve in the face of the political crisis, Bowen implies, has led to this catastrophe; it did not warrant it, but it did nothing to stop it either. Both the British-led and Irish militias during the Irish Troubles razed homes. While the identity of the executioners is left ambiguous—critics are divided over whether the book condemns or commemorates the Ascendancy—they are likely members of the IRA, encoded with silence throughout the novel. Silence is met with silence.

Ironic silence resonates in *The Death of the Heart*, where again Bowen infuses the home with deep structures of meaning. Windsor Terrace, the Quaynes' home in London, is inhabited by silence in rather forbidding ways. Waikiki, the Heccomb's house by the sea with its "gloriously vulgar name" and "rude vigour" (Ellmann 133), is buoyed by noise in liberating, if deafening, ways. While the room-to-room intercom and telephone dominate the former, the wireless set saturates the latter. Telephones, at once intended to preserve decorum and stem interruption, convey the noises and the demands of the indecorous.

### Inhospitable Silence in *The Death of the Heart*

The importance of silence in Bowen's work is nowhere more pronounced than in *The Death of the Heart*. Portia, recently orphaned at sixteen, comes to London to stay with her brother, Thomas Quayne, and his wife, Anna, and, falling for the wrong young man, she suffers the pangs of a romantic attachment. Not so much an invasive listener as an incisive presence, Portia disrupts the sepulchral hush of Windsor Terrace and its inhabitants by uncovering the deadening of feeling that exists beneath refined society. As St. Quentin, Anna's writer-friend and confidante, explains to Portia, "One can suffer a convulsion of one's entire nature, and, unless it makes some noise, no one notices" (330). Portia ensures that her convulsions do not go unnoticed.

Portia interrupts life at Windsor Terrace. Entering the home on a cold day in winter, she finds "an unliving echo: she had entered one of those pauses in the life of a house that before tea time seem to go on and on" (23). Windsor Terrace is marked by an unlivid quality, a house in which "darkness and silence had naturally stolen in on and begun to inhabit" (24). Portia stirs it to life. Matchett, the housemaid, greets Portia, and after a few words are exchanged between them there was "one of those pauses in which animals, face to face, appear to communicate" (24). The pause, a recurrent theme in the narrative, establishes two things: first, the immense stillness of the house affects its occupants; second, the affinity between Portia and Matchett is conveyed in a simple glance. Matchett moves with "voluminous quietness" (91), and is associated with the furniture in the house: "Furniture's knowing all right," she tells Portia, "Not much gets past the things in a room" (101). Matchett is a figure of the past, of history, of memory;

and she provides comfort to Portia, whom the Quaynes are to keep for a year. Matchett's voice "clicked along like a slow tape" (105), she "click[s] her teeth" (24), and later we learn that for Portia there was something "pacific about the click-click-click" (304) of Matchett's knitting. Her name is a clutter of consonants, and the little noises she makes in a house pitched with silence are a comfort to Portia.

The quiet that overruns Windsor Terrace accentuates the tension between Thomas, in a stupor through much of the narrative, and Portia. When Portia encounters her half-brother Thomas in the study, the two engage in a brief exchange that indicates the distance and reservation between them, followed by silence. "The vibration of London was heard through the shuttered and muffled window as though one were half deaf," the narrator explains, and the "house held such tense, positive quiet that he and she might have been all alone in it" (37). The house, like Danielstown in *The Last September*, has a muting, deadening effect on both external and internal noise. Even the silence of the park across from Windsor Terrace is "tense and confined" when closed at night (91). Silence imposes isolation. When Portia raises her head, "as though listening," she exclaims: "'A house *is quiet*, after a hotel. In a way, I am not used to it yet. In hotels, you keep hearing other people, and in flats you had to be quiet for fear they should hear you'" (37). Remembering the unsettled aspects of a life in constant motion, Portia is attuned to the noises and silences that define a dwelling, the social architecture of domestic sounds among homes, hotels, and flats. In her innocent way, though, Portia is hinting to Thomas that perhaps the house is too quiet. Her discomfort with the quiet of the house suggests a fear of being overheard and having her privacy exposed.

Silence is an "aristocratic privilege" (354), one the telephone is intended to



preserve. The telephone functions paradoxically in *The Death of the Heart*, as both a disruptive and a pacifying instrument. The buzzing or ringing of a telephone is always an alarm. But telephones, and more precisely intercoms, can also function to reduce noise and lessen interruption. The telephone, particularly the room-to-room telephone at Windsor Terrace, functions ironically, for it must interrupt with its buzz in order to prevent a physical interruption, creating a kind of barrier of sound through which more intrusive sounds and disruptions are not to pass, all in the name of the preservation of good behaviour and quiet. In the middle of her conversation with St. Quentin, Anna is telephoned by Eddie. Answering the telephone “crossly” (30), Anna does not reveal who has called right away. Then the room-to-room telephone, which, “instead of ringing, let out a piercing buzz” (31), buzzes, only to report that Thomas has arrived home. The custom, rather than entering the room in person, alleviates face-to-face encounters. The moratorium on the unexpected, of course, creates expectations: Anna knows it is Thomas before she picks up.

The Quaynes utilize the telephone to keep the undesirable away. Physical callers have all but been “eliminated” (109) at Windsor Terrace. The telephone and attendant demand that one call first before coming erects an invisible force-field about the home: “The Quaynes’ home life was as much their private life as though their marriage had been illicit. Their privacy was surrounded by an electric fence—friends who did not first telephone did not come” (109). All “callers” at Windsor Terrace must be telephone callers first; they are, to use Derrida’s distinction, always invited guests, never visitants. Hospitality is conditional. In other words, their quiet, uninterrupted life remains that way by coordinating interruptions, creating expectations on the unexpected. The electric

fence is operative between the couple as well, as they employ the intercom to announce their movements throughout the house. The telephone prevents people from showing up unannounced; the Quaynes protect privacy for its own sake. When Major Brutt shows up unannounced, the doorbell “did not repeat itself,” as either of the telephonic devices might do, but rather, “lingered on uneasily in the air” (309). Bowen litters the novel with pauses that relate to social disengagement and feeling. Moreover, since “Telegrams were almost always telephoned through,” the probability that it could be a caller at the door is unthinkable to Thomas. The servants are just as unprepared; Phyllis “had forgotten how to cope with a plain call” (109). Through the strict adherence to mediating technologies and a conforming social network, Thomas and Anna are able to minimize interruption. Major Brutt, who does not comply with the distancing effects of modern technology and is himself out-of-date, is the one who breaks the code of decorum.

As suggested earlier, Waikiki, in contrast to the controlled quiet of Windsor Terrace, is a space defined by an unrestrained noise. Aside from the daily “bang” that announces Daphne’s arrival home, Portia learns that Waikiki “was a sounding box: you knew where everyone was, what everyone did—except when the noise they made was drowned by a loud wind” (173). As a sounding box, the house lends Portia the opportunity to try out her feelings for Eddie in a more pronounced fashion: it gives her the auditory space, as it were, to bang around a bit. Like the electric light in her room, Waikiki had a “frankness” about it that was simply “unknown” at Windsor Terrace (173). In contrast to her experience with Thomas and Anna at Windsor Terrace, Portia’s life with the Heccombs seemed the “fount of spontaneous living” (222). According to the

narrator, “Life here seemed to be at its highest voltage, and Portia stood to marvel at Daphne and Dickie as she might have marvelled at dynamos” (222). Daphne and Dickie generate the energy upon which the house runs.

The differences between Windsor Terrace and Waikiki are also borne out by their respective technologies: the telephone and the wireless. At Waikiki, Daphne bawled and yelled at her mother even when “the wireless was not on full blast” (177). So used to shouting over the wireless, Mrs. Heccomb adopts what can be described only as a natural amplification of her voice, so that “shouting had acquired, after years of evenings with Daphne and the music, the mild equability of her speaking voice: she could shout without strain” (175). Daphne uses the wireless as a kind of noisy background to all communication, creating a stark contrast with the sepulchral quiet of Windsor Terrace. And this expression through volume is a daily habit for Daphne. Working in the “tomblike hush” of the library all day—Bowen starkly contrasts reading a book in the library with listening to the wireless—Daphne must keep “fit by making a loud noise,” by never simply touching objects but slamming her hand upon them, or shouting even when the wireless were not turned on (177). Though Mrs. Heccomb spends much of her working life “intercepting noise,” she seems to take pleasure in “letting Daphne rip. The degree of blare and glare she permitted Daphne may even have been Mrs. Heccomb’s own tribute to the life force it had for so long been her business to check” (177). In a way, Daphne takes on the characteristics of the wireless set she so often lets blare, so much so that even Mrs. Heccomb, in turn, allows her to “blare and glare” (177) with similar abandon. No one is really alone in a home of such noise. All Portia need do is “tap on the wall. We are all very near together in this house,” Mrs. Heccomb assures

her (180).

As it turns out, one must make noise if one is to be heard, counted as present. What is most horrifying for Portia, for any young girl for that matter, is not to be (counted as) present. Children have the uncanny ability in Bowen's novels, however, for listening in, for being where one is not. Returning from Waikiki, Portia resumes life in the empty house in London: "The clocks, set and wound, ticked the hours away in immaculate emptiness. Portia—softly opening door after door, looking all round rooms with her reflecting dark eyes, glancing at each clock, eyeing each telephone—did not count as a presence" (301). The syntax of the sentence delays the impact of meaning: Portia is so quiet she does not register a presence, unlike the telephones and clocks. In *The House in Paris*, Henrietta, the irrepressible English girl, is attuned to sounds of all kinds, hearing within them codes of conduct and the whispers of restraint. With Mme. Fisher lurking in the room upstairs, Henrietta verges on the clairvoyant, certainly the "clear-hearer" who imagines through sound. Thinking of time, of the clock, of Mme. Fisher, and death, Henrietta could

not hear the clock without seeing the pendulum, with that bright hypnotic disc at its tip, which set the beat of her thoughts till there were not thoughts. Steps crossed the ceiling and stopped somewhere: was Miss Fisher standing by her sick mother's bed? She can't be dying, she wants to know about me. The stern dying go on out without looking back; sleepers go out a short way, never not hearing the vibrations of Paris, a sea-like stirring, horns, echoes indoors, electric bells making stars in the grey swinging silence that never perfectly settles in volutions of streets and

empty courts of stone. (27)

The passage, marked by surging alliteration and assonance, captures the child's thoughts as she falls asleep. Henrietta is tuned into the ticking of the house itself, and at a loss why grown ups behave so strangely. Leopold, on the other hand, "was more happy than Henrietta in having learnt already to keep this outside himself, more happy in having intellect" (198). Leopold, however, is defined by his transitory, homeless status as a Jewish boy in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup>

Henrietta sees with her ears. Since one cannot always see what goes on beyond closed doors, she invents noise and conversations. Women, and especially little girls, readers are told, "cannot ignore what goes on in any house" (64). When the front bell "tringed though the house," Henrietta and Leopold both look up (64). As Leopold resumes the cards—ironically, Henrietta is reading his fortune, as the disappointing telegram, announced by the bell, arrives—Henrietta continues to listen: the "cautious steps of women when something has happened came downstairs, sending vibrations up the spine of the house. The women came down with a kind of congested rush, like lava flowing as fast as it can. The sougning of Miss Fisher's petticoats made the house sound tiny. Nothing was said: Henrietta could almost hear them make warning eyes at each other" (65). The drama unfolding beyond the confines of the room is not beyond

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<sup>6</sup> Leopold, who has never met his mother, Karen Michaelis, perhaps disdains the sounds that enrapture Henrietta because he grew up without the "sonorous envelope," "the bath of sounds, especially those of the mother's voice, that surround the young child, soothing, supporting, and stabilizing it," and without which the child may fail to develop a coherent sense of self (Connor 27-28). An auditory equivalent of Lacan's mirror stage, the sonorous envelope gives the child unity from the outside; Kaja Silverman develops and criticizes the notion in *The Acoustic Mirror*. The sonorous envelope might be embodied in the narrative itself. Timothy Adams suggests that "The voice of the middle section is Karen Michaelis's, intuited by her son Leopold" (Adams 50). Phyllis Lassner reads the novel's structure much more diligently: "The past and present sections of the novel simulate a 'dialogue' between mother and son while confirming that it never takes place. Although it breaks the silences shaping the novel, the dialogue occurs as a silence, within their unspoken thoughts. As the separate but interpenetrating structure implies, the novel provides boundaries to each story and to the characters of mother and son while suggesting their interdependence" (*Elizabeth Bowen* 93).

Henrietta's realm of perception.

Theodora Thirdman, in Bowen's *Friends and Relations* (1931), is also an expert listener. Theodora, always "intently listening" (13), deciphers social relations and loves that others do not. As loud as Portia, Theodora's large feet "thundered" through her parents' flat (28) when she is bored. She finds solace in making prank phone calls. When everyone is out of the flat, she rings up "several prominent people and, skilfully passing secretary or butler, maintain[s] with each a conversation of some seconds, under the pseudonym of Lady Hunter Jervois. She had a pleasant, mature voice: an asset. Passionately passing along the wire she became for those moments the very nerve of some unseen house" (28). Ventriloquizing the "adult" voice in a world of decorum and invisible force fields, Theodora practices social climbing on the telephone as most girls do with dolls and other toys. "The French word *parasitaire*, denoting the corrosive work of parasites but also interference on the telephone-line, encapsulates the role of Theodora," Maud Ellmann argues: "the sponger, 'bounder', stalker who devours her protectors and prevents them, through telephonic or epistolary terrorism, from cocooning home or self against the other" ("Shadowy" 20).

As in *Friends and Relations*, telephones mediate and precipitate crises in *The Death of the Heart*. The telephone is also the medium through which people tell secrets. Portia tells Eddie that Anna has secretly been reading her diary, a confidence that Eddie in turn telephones to Anna. By completing the triangulation of discourse and desire, the telephone both upholds and compromises networks of secrecy and confidences. When Portia uses the telephone to arrange a meeting with Eddie, she is caught using Miss Paullie's telephone and forced to hang up, leaving Eddie rattled by the impression that

she has had “some sort of fit on the line” (359). This “telephone crisis” (356) pales in comparison with the one precipitated by Portia’s dramatic arrival in Major Brutt’s hotel room at the end of the novel.

Answering the telephone constitutes a theatrical event. While Major Brutt enters the “upright telephone coffin” (391) to make the call, the occupants of Windsor Terrace discuss what can be done to find the absent, and very late, Portia. After telephoning Eddie, Anna declares ““What a help telephones are!”” (394). She realizes that because Portia has no friends there is no one for her to call. The telephone is useless when there is no social network for it to plug in and mediate. Feebly, Anna looks at St. Quentin: ““If you were not here, St. Quentin, I could telephone you”” (395). Talking on the telephone performs worry and theatricalizes crisis, the while keeping other people at a distance. Portia, having had her heart rent asunder by Eddie and having found little solace in the frozen world of unfeeling in Windsor Terrace, travels to Major Brutt’s hotel, showing up unannounced. In contrast to his initial visit to Windsor Terrace, Major Brutt realizes he must telephone in advance to alert the Quaynes: ““I don’t like to spring this on them—your just turning up with me, I mean, when they’ve had hours to worry. I’ve got to telephone”” (390). Telephones can neutralize desire, creating expectation for the unexpected; they can also transform the visitor into the invited guest. When the phone does ring, another crucial pause emerges in the interstices of its ring: “Just after the duck came in, the diningroom telephone started ringing. They let it ring for some seconds while they looked at each other” (397). The ambivalent telephone is a call to social obligation. As in *The Heat of the Day* and *To the North*, characters often hesitate before answering a ringing telephone, moments and pauses that are pregnant with meaning.

While Thomas, St. Quentin, and Anna all offer to answer, Anna finally does; but the delay is a crucial one, calling up the empty pauses earlier in the narrative. As when Major Brutt shows up unannounced, the Quayne household is unable to react.

Portia and Matchett also fail to appreciate the insular quality of the telephone that the Quaynes have elaborated. The telephone is a nuisance at best, a reminder of a cold reality at worst. When Portia meditates on solitude, or the solitude of two, the narrator describes how the “telephone ringing when you are in a day dream becomes a cruel attacking voice” (220), and when Matchett is rushing out the door to gather Portia from the train, the telephone, which is meant for “chattering” and comes with a ringing “fit to bring the whole house down” (307), only interrupts and intrudes upon her duties. Thomas’s office has “3 lines” to accommodate all the chattering (307). The telephone represents an audible obligation, a reckoning of acoustic and social space. In “On Not Answering the Telephone,” William Plomer writes: “In my opinion all telephone numbers are wrong numbers. If, of course, your telephone rings and you decide not to answer it, then you will have to listen to an idiotic bell ringing and ringing in what is supposed to be the privacy of your own home. You might as well buy a bicycle bell and ring it yourself” (24). According to Peter Conrad, the telephone bell issues a “summons,” and announces that privacy is “no longer impregnable” (602).

As they decide how to bring Portia home from Major Brutt’s hotel room, St. Quentin explains to the Quaynes how Portia, “the pure of heart,” lives in a “world of heroes,” and therefore expects the very best from people (407). By distancing Portia’s expectations to a fictive world, the three do not feel bound to meet her social and moral demands. “I swear,” he goes on, “that each of us keeps, battened down inside himself, a



sort of lunatic giant—impossible socially, but full-scale—and that it’s the knockings and batterings we sometimes hear in each other that keeps our intercourse from utter banality. Portia hears these the whole time; in fact, she hears nothing else. Can we wonder she looks so goofy most of the time?” (407). Of course, Windsor Terrace is rigged to net, cage, and put down the “knockings and batterings” of the “lunatic giant.” And “lunatic” recalls Eddie’s attack on Portia back in his flat, where he cruelly chastises Portia for her “lunatic set of values” and for having a “sense missing” that does not enable her to “know what is unspeakable” (370-71). The three wisely decide to do the “obvious thing” (410) and send Matchett to collect Portia from the hotel. Matchett stops by Portia’s room on her way out, and notices that “the room seemed to expect nobody back” (411). Recognizing Portia’s emotional state in the manner with which Portia had left her room, “as though the day had died alone in here,” Matchett “switched on the electric fire” (411). At the Karachi Hotel, Matchett ignores the bell “because this place was public,” and “pushed on the brass knob with an air of authority” (418).

*The Death of the Heart* concludes in going: Portia’s going prompts Matchett’s going to retrieve her, while the Karachi Hotel itself is an impermanent abode, a space between goings. Departures are events in Bowen’s novels. *The House in Paris* ends with Henrietta boarding a train—“gone, importantly silent, forever” (237)—while Leopold remains, temporarily at least, in Ray’s charge. The novel ends on the cusp of departure. The narrator repeats Leopold’s question about destination to Ray, and alliterative patterns pay tribute to the fullness of movement and noise embodied in the rail station: “Where are we going now? The station is sounding, resounding, full of steam caught on light and arches of dark air: a temple to the intention to go somewhere. Sustained sound in the

shell of stone and steel, racket and running, impatience and purpose, make the soul stand still like a refugee, clutching all it has got, asking: 'I am where?'" (237). In *To the North*, the questions of departure and destination are given disquieting answer.

### Technology and Noise in *To the North*

*To the North* is a cinematic novel that ends with a spectacular car crash fit for the big screen. The novel charts the way energy travels through social networks as well as networks of communication and transportation. Ambivalent technologies, such as the telephone, bring pleasure and disappointment. While trains enable face-to-face meeting and conversation, aeroplanes force alternative means of communication because of their deafening sound. Motor cars shuttle the upper-middle class to and from London to satiate the "anxiety to be elsewhere" (90), as an ailing Vicar puts it. But the cost of widening the "roar of London" (278) proves fatal to Markie and Emmeline.

Technology informs the social. Lady Waters, for example, possesses similar capabilities as the radio wave. Lady Waters, the narrator explains comically, is one able to "detect situations that did not exist" (22). Likewise, Lady Waters herself is "tuned up to receive" those "first intimations of crisis," even before those caught in a predicament were aware of it themselves (22). In other words, Lady Waters—not unlike Harrison in *The Heat of the Day* who picks up the vibrations of the telephone before it rings and understands that ring as some kind of code—was herself like an antenna on a wireless set, picking up frequencies and waves of the distinctly social variety. Lady Waters is a figurehead of high society who controls and dictates fashion, but with a modern twist. She transmits social energy: "she entered one's house on a current that set the furniture

bobbing; at Rutland Gate destiny shadowed her tea-table. Her smallest clock struck portentously, her telephone trilled from the heart, her dinner-gong boomed a warning” (22). Instruments sound louder, as if imbued with greater meaning and purpose; her social energy amplifies, so that Lady Waters “enlargened her own life into ripples of apprehension on everybody’s behalf” (22). At Farraways, Emmeline notices the “invisible pattern” the “church bells struck on the air” (79), while Pauline, in another example, notices that when “Big Ben struck,” this “made her think of the wireless” (60).

Characters in *To the North* are obsessed with modern modes of transportation and communication. Lady Waters suggests Cecilia is never entirely happy unless she is on a train, or motoring (26-7). When Emmeline brings up air travel, Lady Waters counters that Cecilia would then arrive too quickly and that “one cannot talk in an aeroplane” (27) because the engines are too loud. Based on Lady Waters’ estimation, Cecilia is only content when moving and talking: kinesis affords her happiness, so it comes as some surprise when she settles down quietly in the end. Emmeline, on the other hand, is the agent who books trips for tourists—the “map of Europe was never far from her mind” (41). Emmeline is more interested in departures and arrivals than in the transport through space it provides. As the Vicar suggests later in the novel, modern transportation has fed, if not created, the desire to be elsewhere, without delay: “I am still surprised by the speed at which things fly past. But nowadays the whole incentive to motoring seems an anxiety to be elsewhere” (90).

Technologies, like the telephone, generate social noise. Gerda, instructed to do some telephoning for Lady Waters, returns to report on her failure: “It made that buzzing, gone-away noise at me every number I dialled: you know how a telephone

makes one feel, Lady Waters, quite in disgrace!” (124). Rather than establish the wished-for connection, the telephone affronts its caller with an absent auditor and silence. In Julian’s case, according to Cecilia, it is not the telephone that fails him, but rather he that fails it. “She thought he was really bad on the telephone” (156), which is tantamount to saying he is not sociable. What’s worse, Julian calls during lunch, while Cecilia has guests. The connection appears to fail or go dead at several moments, emblemizing the bad connection that exists between the two and highlighting the inane content of the social call:

‘I’ve been giving my sister lunch.’

‘Did she enjoy herself?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘How terrible. I do wish—’

‘What did you say?’

‘The line’s bad, isn’t it?’ said Cecilia, nervous. ‘Something keeps on buzzing.’

‘Does it? I don’t think—’

‘I’m so sorry if I said anything—I mean I did mean what I said but I needn’t have said it like that—Are you there?’

‘Yes.’

‘I do wish you would come and see me.’

‘Do you think it would be a success.’

‘Oh yes; that sort of thing always is.’

‘Then I’ll—’

'*Oh my God,*' said Cecilia. 'I've left the door open!'

Silence sent a sharp vibration across the wire. Julian, hanging up, stared a moment more at the dumb black instrument, then touched a bell for his secretary. (156-57)

The conversation is fruitless, as the question of whether a rendezvous would be successful or not almost precludes the meeting entirely. As Bowen does elsewhere, no narrative or authorial voice intercedes to provide the reader with either clarity or irony, except for the one moment during which we learn that Cecilia's nervousness corresponds with her drawing attention to the "buzzing" phone line. The whole conversation is based upon interruption and the failure to speak clearly. The telephone is supposed to admit one into a private exchange, but even then people overhear. According to Ned Schantz, the ideal telephone is a gadget-less telepathy, from one mind to another, without static, noise, delay, or uncertainty (32). In "Telephonic Film," Schantz points out that, when we are on the phone, "Our whole body remains open to an unpredictable world, to noise, interruption, or even assault" (27). The buzzing on the line captures the nerves of the two callers, metaphorizing their fears.

A similar telephone conversation between Karen and Max in *The House in Paris*, quite typical of Bowen's fiction in general, indicates that, even when noise and coincidence are kept at bay during the phone conversation, nothing prevents deadness on the line. Karen, having "shut the window to keep out London, the door to keep out home" (132), awaits her lover Max's call from Paris. When she picks up the receiver, Max begins:

'...Miss Michaelis, please?'

‘Speaking ... Hullo, Max.’

‘Hullo, Karen. Where are you?’

‘Here.’

‘In which room?’

‘The study. They are out. Where are you?’

‘Rue Sylvestre Bonnard. Naomi is at the theatre with the Americans. Her mother has gone to bed.’

‘Ill?’

He said: ‘She has gone to bed,’ in the same tone.

They waited; the line seemed to go dead. ‘Max?’

‘I was overwrought, I wanted to hear your voice.’

‘It’s four weeks since—’

‘Yes. Will you come to Boulogne?’

‘When?’

‘Next Sunday. Or shall I come to Folkestone?’

‘No, not Folkestone; I’ve been there. I mean ... Boulogne.’

‘The boats will give you some hours. Sunday, then.’

‘Yes. Will you meet the morning boat?’

‘Yes.’

The line died again. ‘Max?’

‘Yes?’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good night.’

‘Good night.’

Karen had hung up; they had had less than three minutes. (132-33)

While Max uses “overwrought” to describe his own emotions, the term carefully captures the nature of their conversation. The line “dies” several times, and the three “hads” in the last line emphasize the pastness of the present moment, and provide the only ironic commentary from the narrator.<sup>7</sup>

Following his call, Julian resumed the kind of day that, the narrator explains, “was Peter’s ideal: people coming in quietly,” “telephoning in a tone of governed irritability,” all with a sense of “muted efficiency” (157). The quietness on Julian’s end, however, contrasts sharply with the drama his call causes on Cecilia’s end: having heard the opening notes of the “interlude,” the guests “had exchanged less than a glance and, all raising their voices, maintained a strenuous conversation till she came back. They were not English for nothing” (157). Of course, Cecilia is more concerned about her oversight than her guests are; they raise their voices in order *not* to have to overhear her conversation with Julian. The telephone and its accompanying atmospheres, contexts, moods, and sounds, form a kind of social barrier that approximates the disconnection between Julian and Cecilia and their fundamental inability to communicate their true feelings to one another. In other words, the telephone dissolves as much as it links up. Acoustic backgrounds are telling: the long social lunch, and Julian’s efficient workplace.

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<sup>7</sup> Schantz’s ideal gadget-less telepathy does occur between Karen and Ray in an “unspoken dialogue” that encapsulates their life together (216-17). “Such dialogue, being circular,” the narrator interjects, “has no end” (218)—without the instrument to put down, the “call” could go on forever.

If the telephone does establish one connection, it necessarily breaks or silences another. For Emmeline and Markie, the telephone ruptures their relationship. While initially Emmeline's shortsightedness abets her inability to see Markie for what he really is—a rake—the telephone ultimately provides her with a rounded vision of his character. The telephone enables her to be, in a sense, in Markie's empty flat. Telephoning her way into Markie's flat, she bears the full brunt of his absence: "Very clumsily, slowly, she dialled a number. Looking through the white hall wall as though it were glass she heard the telephone tingle and dot out its double note in the distant flat. No one came. She still listened, seeing distinctly a room she had known too well or been too happy to see, where the repetitive bell made her in some way present, though there must now be nothing but darkness there. He was out. Having wrung from that silence so stamped with his absence no stir or answer, she hung up at last" (287). Markie's absence is conveyed in two three-word, conclusive statements ("No one came" and "He was out") that echo back the "double note" from the distant flat. The narrator does not even entertain the possibility that he is home and not answering.

A conduit of telephonic energy, Emmeline picks up the telephone again to call Mrs. Dolman, Markie's sister and housemate (288). As Emmeline continues her auditory pursuit, sound penetrates the body in the same way that her consciousness penetrates the walls of Markie's empty flat. Telephones discern truth. The receiver "clammy" in her hands, Emmeline calls Daisy (289). Though Daisy places her hand over the receiver to cover up Markie's presence in the room, "small chinks of sound came through," enough bits of information to allow Emmeline to make up her mind about the goings-on in that flat (289). The "small chinks of sound" constitute an unintentional message, one



Emmeline had been expecting, but not wanting. The telephone metaphorically extends Emmeline's consciousness as it amplifies her perception through the wire. Moreover, for Emmeline, the telephone also promises too much connection with Markie; earlier in the novel, she asks Markie not to call her, for "She did not want life here disturbed by a voice that was too beloved, or ever alarmed by silences" (236). When the telephone bears a love connection, its presence can be unbearable. Silence can be as terrorizing as a telephone that will not stop ringing.

Rather than answer her telephone, Cecilia "stood listening" (182) to it. Longing for the ring of connection, she has an epiphany about silence and its solace. Increasingly aggravated by the telephone ringing, Cecilia realizes the breadth of the silence and the leisure-time she fleetingly enjoyed: "The usual music became discordant—at once she felt how precious had been her solitude, that silence throughout her house with its archways and cool twisting stairs" (182). The syntax leaves ambiguous whether it is the silence or the house that possesses "archways and cool twisting stairs." Like a big house, silence has its own peculiar architecture, something Portia understands exceedingly well in *The Death of the Heart*, as do Bowen's other adolescent characters, especially Henrietta in *The House in Paris*. Thinking not only of the silence from which the telephone calls her away, but also the leisurely life she lives with Emmeline, Cecilia "felt herself torn from something . . . Meanwhile, the stranger clamoured" (182). The telephone, then, executes a kind of violence not only on silence, but on the self. For Cecilia, she thinks, epiphany comes in the realization that in the absence of social obligation, her life is as transparent as "water poured into a glass" (182). But that realization is cut short by the stranger on the line who clamours for her company, to whom Cecilia can only submit, adding the

hollow assertion, “I am always happy alone” (182)—which, we know, is not true.

The confluence of the social and technological grows increasingly disruptive. Some technologies make communication impossible, discombobulating the human in the process. In “In the Air,” perhaps the noisiest chapter in the novel, Emmeline and Markie board a plane for Le Bourget airport in Paris. While the telephone foregrounds tenuous connections between characters, Markie and Emmeline’s bad connection is doubly exposed by the excessive noises of the airplane. The title of the chapter is a pun referring to Emmeline’s and Markie’s relationship. The scene prefigures the narrative conclusion in so far as it highlights a fundamental friction between the two that is externalized in the excessive loudness of air travel. In the air, “they became encased in a roaring hum, a vibration that shook the ear-drums, and for some minutes while he arranged himself grimly, curdled his every thought: that summer, planes were not silent” (185). Markie, inexperienced in flight, feels the vibrations of the roaring engines in such a way that he can get neither his body nor his mind to settle down, his thoughts “curdled” like milk in an urn. As Markie’s senses begin to recover from the “numbness” that had spread inward from his ear-drums down, he “began to discount hearing, to be aware of noise as sensible, visible, inimical only when one attempted speech, as vibration whenever the finger-tips touched an object, vibration of shadows and fringes of the silk curtains against the shining air” (184, 185). Discounting hearing, overwhelmed by the sheer loudness of sound, Markie admits the vibrations of sound through his other senses, such as touch and sight. Finding both confusion and clarity in the moment, his perception of Emmeline alters. He notices how “[c]lose in the strong light and distant in the roaring silence her face appeared transparent” (185), a description that echoes Cecilia’s self-

awareness a few pages prior. Unable to speak because of the noise, the two write messages back and forth on *The Tatler*. Markie appreciates the luxury afforded him by this mode of communication, the “indiscretions of letter-writing, the intimacies of speech were at once his” (186), but he leaves Emmeline a cold on the long-term prospects of their relationship together. Emmeline, however, could not help but realize that she “was embarked, they were embarked together, no stop was possible; she could now turn back only by some unforeseen and violent deflection—by which her exact idea of personal honour became perilled—from their set course” (187). Unlike a train or motor trip, once one boards the plane and that plane takes flight, one is “committed” (188); there is no getting off.

As she does the expansive “roar” (278) of London, Emmeline begins to feel the effects of moving dangerously. In addition to her split with Markie, Emmeline realizes with Cecilia’s telegraphed engagement (to Julian) announcement that she her current home life will be broken up. Defeated by these breaks in her life, Emmeline begins to register the noises of London as she searches for a new apartment: “All these years while Emmeline worked in her quiet office these streets, so noisy and near, had been going on: now she and they were acquainted” (300). Emmeline feels exposed, a lack of security registered through noise. Frightened by a sudden “intensification of London’s roar in her brain,” she sits down in a teashop and writes to Markie, who does not answer (300). She walks around London in a daze, almost getting hit by a lorry (the man shouts at her): “One note held her ears through the hollow thunder of traffic: in shells of buildings the whirr of unanswered telephones. These were insistent: she put her hands to her head ...” (301). The cinematic image of a dazed women assaulted by the horrific “whirr of

unanswered telephones” in the “shells of buildings” is apocalyptic. The “whirr” also recalls the “whirr of arrival” (189) when Emmeline and Markie’s plane touched down in France; here, however, all is in a state of departure, though the destination is uncertain. The chapter concludes when Cecilia informs Emmeline that the vicar at Farraways has died; another note confirming Emmeline’s sense of endings.

Circulating now uncertainly, Emmeline desires quiet and silence. The final chapter, “To the North,” begins as the couple “drove in silence” (316). Allan Hepburn suggests that driving, narrative, and destiny share a similar design, and that “Driving is a form of death. As Freud says about travellers (although he was thinking about trains and was himself an anxious train traveller), all images of travel are coded representations of death” (“Driving” 66). As they head north, Emmeline no longer wishes to discuss her now broken relationship with Markie and, unsatisfied with his excuses and explanations, declares: “I only want to be quiet” (318), repeating the request again and again (322). Earlier in the novel, the narrator explains how Markie had the “effect of suspending her faculties not unpleasantly, like some very loud noise to which one becomes accustomed.” She no longer seems, nor wants, to be accustomed to his noise. However, the hardboiled Markie reminds Emmeline that she cannot avoid the situation: “Keep driving all night, angel: you won’t get away from this!” (324). Out of this silence emerge the road-signs, which seem to get louder the further they go, the first as they pass the airport (remind readers of the flight they took; of Emmeline’s desire for speed) which Markie notices distinctly: “He saw ‘The North’ written low, like a first whisper, on a yellow A.A. plate with an arrow pointing” (319). The increasing volume of the road signs recalls Emmeline’s experience in the streets outside her London office. Excessive noise, even of

the figurative kind emanating from road signs, marks a kind of collapse.

As Markie continues to broach the distance that divides them, and Emmeline only wishes for quiet, the car suddenly seems to Markie to be “past her control” (320). When Emmeline stops the car, they both drop their voices, and as he looks in her eyes and found “only night in her pupils, sensing an absence in her surrender he let her go: ‘As you feel,’ he said and stared at the two lit dials: the clock, the speedometer” (322). The two dials count time and distance divided by time. As Emmeline brings them back onto the roadway leading north, she has, in a way, merged with the motor: “Speed, mounting through her nerves with the consciousness of direction, began to possess Emmeline—who sat fixed, immovable with excitement—and shocked back his numbing faculties into alarm. ‘*Not so fast*,’ he said again” (323). The way that the vibration and speed of transportation numb Markie and excite Emmeline is reminiscent of their experiences on the plane bound for Paris. But here, the gentle communication of written notes is replaced by combative yelling. Markie, rather than touch her, began

shouting into the darkness between their faces invective, entreaties, reproaches, stripping the whole past and taxing her with their ruin. He exposed every nerve in their feeling: nothing remained unsaid ... Nervously shaking her hair back, gripping the wheel beside Markie, Emmeline, who said nothing, drove, as though away from the ashy destruction of everything, not looking back. Running dark under their wheels the miles mounted by tens: she felt nothing—Like a shout from the top of a bank, like a loud chord struck on the dark, she saw: “TO THE NORTH” written black on white, with a long black immovably

flying arrow.

Something gave way.

An immense idea of departure—expresses getting steam up and crashing from termini, liners clearing the docks, the shadows of planes rising, caravans winding out into the first dip of the desert—possessed her spirit, now launched like the long arrow. (325)

The shout tears apart. Bowen's lovers often shout: "For when we shout, we tear. We tear apart distance; we disallow distance to the object of our anger, or of our ecstasy. When I shout, I am all voice, you are all voice, the space between us is nothing but a delirium tremens of voice" (Connor 33). But Emmeline, as the miles gather "by tens," feels nothing. The "low whisper" of the sign passed near the aerodome is replaced by one bold and loud, as if it were audible; it comes to Emmeline almost as a command, as if it is a sound vibration that reorients her being.

Bowen draws the link between transportation and the desire to be elsewhere, speed and noise, in death. The "immense idea of departure" which possesses Emmeline, like the long arrow she becomes, brings back her fascination with train schedules, maps, and directions—all of with which she merges. Emmeline is gone, "unmoved at the shadowy map of her pain," and as the narrator describes, she "was lost to her own identity, a confining husk," so that "eyes without consciousness" now governed her driving with an "unrelaxed grip on the wheel and unknowing pressure on the accelerator" so that "speed streamed from her unawares" (326, 327). Defined by muted negations (the many "un-" prefixes) and repeated "nothing" in the passage, Emmeline embodies negation. Though Markie is shouting at her, Emmeline is already gone, a

conduit of speed, and “she heard nothing, or heard some singing silence inside her brain” (327). Markie, marked by noise, is muted, a mere passenger. Back in London, Cecilia and Julian go about their business as the “uninterrupted quiet of evenings to come already covered this evening,” and “the house seemed still to echo the others’ departure” (328, 329). The departed, in Bowen’s novels, always leave behind some sonic remainder.

The themes that preoccupy Bowen in her 1930s novels reappear, refined and renovated, in her short stories of the Second World War and her blitz novel, *The Heat of the Day*. Technology is at its most destructive in *The Heat of the Day*. Homes have history, but flats and buildings bend, burst, and blast apart in the blitz. Histories, memories, and lovers go with them. *The Heat of the Day* is about listening during the war—to the war, but also through the war—for the notes of relief and recovery that come like the tinkle of broken glass.

## Chapter Two: Listening to War in *The Heat of the Day*

While attending a party at Elizabeth Bowen's flat in London on a warm autumn evening in 1941, Stephen and Natasha Spender recall venturing out on the terrace with the other guests during an aerial bombardment, the sky lit up with magnesium flares and searchlights. "I do ap-ap-apologize for the *noise*," said the imperturbable hostess, with her characteristic stutter," as the party listened to the blitz overhead (Sutherland 271).<sup>1</sup>

Roland Barthes claims that listening is a means by which humanity recognizes itself in space, and most specifically domestic space (246). While the war assaulted the senses and humanity began to see itself differently, Bowen still insisted on decorum and the rituals of civilization. Nevertheless, Bowen refused to apologize for what might be described as the noisy style in her war novel, *The Heat of the Day* (1949).

In *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen's prose runs its own "broadcast-echoing course" until "On and off, on and off sounded the sirens in the nightmare sunlessness" (*HOD* 371). It is "blitz-writing," according to Andrew Bennett and Nicolas Royle (94). Robert Caserio positions Bowen's use of "disjunction in form and content" and the "breakup of conjunctions" as indicators of her "antinarrative modernism" (269). Bowen defends the syntactical arrangements of *The Heat of the Day* in an unpublished letter, dated 2 June 1948. The letter is addressed to Daniel George, at Jonathan Cape publishing house. She thanks George and William Plomer—who once compared Bowen's writing to a "circular saw" (Jordan 64)—for their attentive reading. She has corrected some repeated words, but at their suggestion of changing word order, she responds:

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Lassner points out that "Bowen later wrote of 'the tensions and mystery of my father's illness, the apprehensive silences or chaotic shoutings' that made her 'tough' but also afflicted her with a lifelong stammer" (*Short Fiction* 43).



I cannot, myself, bear fanciful arrangement of words in sentences. But, in this novel, many sentences in which the order is queer are deliberate, because the sentences won't (as I see it) carry the exact meaning, or—still more important—make the exact psychological impact that I desire in any other way. E.g. 'This tarnished open air theatre in which no plays had been acted for some time...' You suggest 'in which for some time no plays had been acted ...' But I want the psychological stress to fall on 'time', not on 'acted'; so therefore I like to give 'time' the more sounding position of the two ... The same applies to 'Nothing more now than suffering the music he sat on tensely...' If I reversed this to, 'He sat on tensely, nothing more now than suffering the music', something I wish from the effect (impact) of the sentence would be lost. I've taken these examples from Chapter I, but there are other examples all the way through.

In other contexts, too, I'd rather keep the jars, 'jingles' and awkwardness—e.g. 'seemed unseemly', 'felt to falter'. They do to my mind express something. In some cases I want the rhythm to jerk or jar—to an extent, even, which may displease the reader. (HRC 10.4)

Bowen is thinking about syntax in terms of the placement of stress, meaning, and ends. Her attention to the "more *sounding* position" of certain key words and concepts, even if it "may displease the reader," is an important insight into her guiding principles of expression.

In the same letter, she expresses her distaste for "poetic prose," but admits that

sometimes prose must do the work of poetry, and thereby one should receive greater experimental license. But the stress on “poetic,” surely for lack of a better term, might distract from the note upon which Bowen concludes the passage. Her use of alliteration, “queer” word orders and syntactical structures, often results in a different degree of fluidity at times akin to the melodious and harmonious, but these manipulations can also “jerk or jar” the reader, resulting in a prose that is disjunctive. If Orwell’s formula during this period is correct—“Good prose is like a window pane” (*Essays* 7)—then Bowen’s writing in *The Heat of the Day* is best described as shattered glass.

*The Heat of the Day* constitutes Bowen’s most mature engagement with noise and silence. The racket of war threatens to engulf and diminish personal costs and tragedies, muted stories that the novel seeks to recover. Noises and silences become remarkable, emerging as they do within an atmosphere of suspicion, guardedness, and duality, where identities are mutable and language rife with uncertainty. Bowen’s emphasis on the sound of modernist experience provides an acoustic alternative to the primacy of the visual in British modernism. Attention to language in *The Heat of the Day* achieves nuclear precision, a fact not lost within the emerging climate of the cold war: words are split like atoms, with sometimes muted, sometimes explosive results. Noise erupts in the text though air-raid sirens, bombs, telephone bells, clocks, church bells, and broken glass. Noise complicates conversation, routine, love. Like the silence that swoops in with the fading glimmer of light during the blackout, noise penetrates space. When walls go down, people come together; war and love go hand in hand through the glass-swept streets of London in Bowen’s tour de force.

The blitz leaves in its wake minds and ruins that no longer register or reverberate.

The difference between the autumn of 1940, the first round of the blitz, and 1942, is represented geographically by the war having moved from the still-audible “horizon” to the “map” (100) and psychologically by consciousness having deadened to the unrelenting morale effort. Living amidst the “first generation of ruins,” the narrator suggests, is like living without memory, without the resonances and echoes of thought:

It was from this new insidious echoless propriety of ruins that you breathed in all that was most malarial. Reverses, losses, deadlocks now almost unnoticed bred one another; every day the news hammered one more nail into a consciousness which no longer resounded. Everywhere hung the heaviness of the even worse you could not be told and could not desire to hear. This was the lightless middle of the tunnel. Faith came down to a slogan, desperately re-worded to catch the eye, requiring to be pasted each time more strikingly on to hoardings and bases of monuments ... No, no virtue was to be found in the outward order of things: happy those who could draw from some inner source. (100)

In *London At War*, Philip Ziegler champions Bowen’s description as evoking with “characteristic precision the malaise that affected London in 1943” (233). Living outside of the immediate vicinity of war with all its horrendous noises means living under a different barrage of propaganda and news. News of the war having taken the place of the noise of the war is what one can no longer bear to hear. Consciousness ceases to resonate with the immediate din of what was near, leaving behind ruins in which the news of victory, or losses, fails to echo. Though the posters continue to hammer away morale-raising messages into the mind, nothing remains. Bowen captures in this

remarkable passage the exhaustion of the faculties, where “echoless...ruins” are “breathed in,” where “news hammered ...consciousness,” and where the outward perception of things fails to register.

Since inner life must become a source of strength and renewal, Stella Rodney looks back to her time with Robert Kelway in 1940, a time associated with the inimitable sound of things like the “icelike tinkle of broken glass being swept up” from the explosions in the night, amidst the “charred freshness of every morning” (100-01). In the audible “tinkle” and the “charred freshness”—remnants of nightly trauma that bear within them the movements of recovery—Stella finds a piece of strength, but it too is fleeting: she could recapture the sensation, but no thoughts remained (101). Bowen discusses the cycle of disaster and recovery in “London, 1940,” noting how the Autumn is a “funny time to be bombed” and commenting on the glass being swept up with the leaves (*MT* 23). In “Calico Windows,” an essay from 1944, Bowen discusses the sense of dreamlike renewal that accompanies these replacement windows for blasted homes and blasted lives. The essay, intended to lift spirits, describes the return of once-familiar noise to the home: “Through their panes you hear, with unexpected distinctness, steps, voices, and the orchestration of traffic from the unseen outside world. (Talkers outside a calico window should be discreet.) Glass lets in light and keeps out sound; calico keeps out (most) light and lets sound in. The inside of your house, stripped of rugs, cushions and curtains, reverberates” (*PPT* 183). The windows let the sounds of life back in the home, inaugurating this “dreamlike next phase” of recovery (183). Hope returns in full force at the end of the essay, as Bowen looks forward to the post-war moment, ideally framed: “I say to myself, all my life when I see a calico window, I shall be back in summer 1944.

Then I remember—when war is over, there will be no more of this nonsense; we shall look out through glass. May the world be fair!” (186). The dislocation from warfare to postwar, as an imaginative leap, is figured in terms of windows and points of view.

*The Heat of the Day* opens on a September Sunday during the closing moments of the day, when “War had made them idolise day and summer; night and autumn were enemies” (3-4). Musicians perform in Regent’s Park in the “musical fading of light,” a twilight symphony that begins with the “last crackle of sunset” and ends when the “clock in the distance struck” (9, 7, 11). Barbara Watson reads the opening setting as overtly civilized as the “roofless theatre” recalls Greek tragedy and the Viennese orchestra, the model of European gentility and international harmony (Watson 133). Her reading is corroborated by what Jacques Attali has written about noise and the political economy of music: the musical structuring of noise is not unlike the political structuring of community. Amidst the civilizing notes, readers are introduced to Robert Harrison lost in “some unhearing obsession” (5), an initial glimpse of his peculiar relation to sound and his unusual habits of listening. Louie Lewis watches him and hopes for a romantic rendezvous. As Harrison listens to the orchestra and Louie watches, the narrator describes how for the mysterious Harrison sound “had become a necessary circumstance: having begun to think in it he could not think without it—whenever a number ended in a ripple of clapping he looked sharply up, with an air of outrage and dislocation, as though the lawn had shifted under his feet” (6). Whatever Harrison is thinking over, the music provides less of an accompaniment than a necessary ground for thought. Harrison is straining to appreciate the finer notes of high culture—while everyone applauds, he is enraged—but the scene also cues readers to the ways characters

interact with networks of sound during the war.

Harrison's curious relationship to sound is made even more remarkable by the telephone. When Harrison telephones Stella to arrange a visit, she marks how the "exaggerated quietness of his voice hinted at some undefined threat—she was at a disadvantage through having avoided knowing him" (21). Rather than raise his voice, Harrison lowers it, if only to heighten the accent of meaning. There is something else at work during these telephone conversations, vibrations of meaning held just below the surface that supply additional information. This phone call and the subsequent meeting, during which Harrison accuses Robert Kelway of treason, establish the principal love triangle in the novel, one in which private affairs become crossed with public duties.

Harrison's telephone manner perturbs Stella, and his "exaggerated quietness" seems to take on a threatening life of its own. Unusual telephone calls are encoded with secondary meanings, alternate messages, and deeper significances, so much so that Stella accuses Harrison of ringing up "like the Gestapo" (33).<sup>2</sup> In other words, Harrison's telephone manners leave Stella feeling as if he has something on her—the "undefined threat"—an innuendo of interrogation and invasion. Because of the blitz, where every night bears the same undefined threat, nerves are exposed and over-sensitive. In anticipation of Harrison's arrival, Stella reflects on the stillness of the night: "Silence mounted the stairs, to enter her flat through the windows from the deserted street. In fact, the scene at this day and hour could not have been more perfectly set for violence—but that was not in the cards. She had recognised in him, from the first, the

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<sup>2</sup> Later in the novel, Robert's sister Ernestine refuses to telephone him to discuss selling the family home, "except in a series of groans, warning hisses and hydrophobic laughs, interspersing what sounded to be a code" (282). Robert, knowing the authorities are moving in, marks the moment of his terror at the prospect of never seeing Stella again "the first time the telephone rang" during his visit to Holme Dene (313). He never answers it.

quietness of a person perpetually held back from some extreme: it had not, however, been till this morning, on the telephone, that the quietness became an extreme itself" (22).<sup>3</sup> The war politicized homes and lives by bombing them and, as Kristine Miller points out, public policies of rationing and blackout filled homes with political energy (142). Unlike *The Last September*, where noise disturbs the quiet of the evening, silence moves in like a tide. Stella is alerted to the intentionality it embodies by Harrison's extreme reserve. But rather than introduce violence, Harrison is intent on the politics of love.

Harrison's relationship to networks of sound is portentous. When Roderick, Stella's son on leave from the war, calls to announce his arrival in London, a curious thing happens: Harrison "heard the telephone before she did, being one of those people who receive that vibration just before the ring" (45). He turns his head toward the bedroom telephone in advance of the bell.<sup>4</sup> Harrison is sensitive to secret networks, perhaps the best explanation for his "extreme" (22) quietness. As when he sits and listens to music being played in Regent's Park, Harrison is particularly attuned to the vibrations that constitute sound, as if reading in them something surreptitious. When the phone continues its double-ringing, Harrison "listened closely as though trying to familiarise himself with a code" (45). Harrison's counter-espionage repertoire, then, is comprised of a conspicuous quietness and a good ear for codes. Stella's relationship to the phone is

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<sup>3</sup> Recognition and identity are major themes in the novel. Harrison and Robert are doubles of one another, both sharing the same first name, while Louie Lewis and Roderick Rodney are, in a sense, doubles of themselves. Barbara Watson points to Harrison's lack of any "homing instinct" (141) and his crooked eyes as signs of his transience and untrustworthy character.

<sup>4</sup> Following Robert's admission of working against the war effort, he rises to dress and mentions that there is likely a man waiting down below her flat for him, as there "has been a step," and the man is likely Harrison. Stella, caught unawares as she did not hear a thing, contends: "I didn't hear. And if it had been *his* step I should have heard it; in fact, I should have known it before I heard it" (322).

telling as well. Stella picks up the “receiver with the unfumbling sureness” of one who answers it at all hours of the night (45). Her “mechanical reflex” to a “mechanical thing” conjures up for Harrison the “first idea he had had of poetry—her life” (46). The observation indicates that Stella has a social grace best exemplified by habit; a life of grace that Harrison has difficulty penetrating, remaining as he does the foreigner in her flat, like a “German in Paris” (46). As John Coates suggests, Harrison enters Stella’s world with a “barbarian attitude to a civilization he can conquer but cannot emulate” (“Rewards” 485).

While the telephone marks one mode of entry of the political into the home, silence marks another. When the lights go down, so does the volume. In the short story “Mysterious Kôr,” characters turn down the wireless and “try to make no noise” (737). Bowen explains in the Preface to *The Demon Lover* that all of her senses were on high alert during the blitz. The darkening of lights attunes Londoners to the surrounding gulf of quiet, so that “the silence was black-out registered by the hearing” (*HOD* 58-59). “The silence,” she writes in “London, 1940,” “is now the enormous thing—it appears to amaze the street” (*MT* 22). Yet it “was imperfect silence, mere resistance to sound—as though the inner tension of London were being struck and struck on without breaking. Heard or unheard, the city at war ticked over” (*HOD* 59). London is anthropomorphized, its “imperfect silence” a kind of defence against attack—not merely the absence of sound but a “resistance to sound” which captures the inner tension of the city fraught with anticipation of something happening. But silence is never absolute, for “there was all the time a jarring at the periphery, an unintermittent pumping of vital traffic through arterial streets into arterial roads. Nor was that quite all: once or twice



across the foreground of hearing a taxi careened as though under fire” (58-59). Figuring London roadways as arteries of the body captures the sensation of lying down to sleep, only to hear inside oneself the blood pumping, outside oneself the traffic in the street. During the blackout people register all the noises that indicate the continuance of life. A Mass Observation (June 1941) questionnaire on the psychological effects of air raids found that, during nightly blackouts, people behaved as if enemy planes could detect their whereabouts: “Others note a tendency to keep particularly quiet in a house when planes seem to be overhead, as if to avoid attracting attention; and on moonlight nights out of doors to walk in the shadow lest the planes see them” (FR 739: 6). Silence, like the blackout, signifies an intersubjective effort, a line of defence against attack. Silence, in this sense, is not just intentional; it is political.

While silences may function as resistance to sound, certain secrets cannot remain quiet. In Stella’s flat, Roderick reaches into the pocket of Robert’s night-coat and hears the “tired crackle of paper” (65). As Stella takes the “secretively-folded” paper without indicating its potential significance, though she registers that this “was dynamite, between her fingers and thumbs” (67), the hyperbole of which captures how the silence of a secret can carry an explosive charge. During times of war, the private, quiet life can become a focal point for political intrigue. When war is brought to the civilian population, secrets begin to function like bombs. Later, when Robert and Stella plumb the depths of his disaffection, Robert contends that he never held anything back. Their conversations and time together did not warrant revelation: ““In accepting me, I thought, you must somehow be in your own way accepting this. Or I thought so sometimes—sometimes so much so that I found myself only waiting to speak till you spoke: when

you didn't speak I thought you thought silence better. I thought, yes, silence *is* better: why risk some silly unmeaning battle between two consciences?" (305). Silence is a resistance to leakage; all talk is careless talk.<sup>5</sup>

The bombs that fall during the initial blitz define the time for Stella as much as her love for Robert does. Love and war, desire and fear, are inextricable for Stella. In fact, it is on one of these "noisy nights" (102) that Stella first meets Robert. The moment, however, is obliterated by an enemy bomber. As they both begin to speak, each unheard by the other, a bomber delivers its load. The bomb, figured by its sound, registers its traumatic charge in the noise of trajectory:

Overhead, an enemy plane had been dragging, drumming slowly round in the pool of night, drawing up bursts of gunfire—nosing, pausing, turning, fascinated by the point for its intent. The barrage banged, coughed, retched; in here the lights in the mirrors rocked. Now down a shaft of anticipating silence the bomb swung whistling. With the shock of detonation, still to be heard, four walls of in here yawped in then bellied out; bottles danced on glass; a distortion ran through the view. The detonation dulled off into the cataracting roar of a split building: direct hit, somewhere else. (104)

The enemy plane and bomb are both heard, but not seen. The position of the narrator "in here" lends the description its most riveting, traumatic effects as the glissade takes place "Now." The repetition of verbs in grammatical congruity creates sonorous

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<sup>5</sup> "Careless talk' is not the same thing as rumour-mongering. Whereas the latter implies an element of falsity, the first is only dangerous if it is true" (Balfour 191). Bowen's wartime short story, "Careless Talk," depicts two women and two men engaged in conversations about the war and the people they know. Mary's worry—"I hope it didn't matter my having told you that"—is the anxiety underwriting all careless talk (*Collected Stories* 670).

conglomerations of sound aimed at heightening the bomb-effect: the alliterative “d’s” and final “ing’s” of the enemy plane are met with the alliterative “b’s” and final “ed’s” of the gunners’ return fire; charting its course in the “anticipating silence,” the “bomb swung whistling” takes the bilabial “b” and infuses it with air for the ensuing “w’s” (like someone whistling). The speed of sound lags behind the impact of the bomb, for the detonation was “still to be heard” while the walls of the club perform their architectural gymnastics: yawping in and bellying out, which comes as a single clamorous motion. Utter distortion is registered on the level of language and syntax, *as* sound. “Yawp” means to make a raucous noise, to shout or cry hoarsely, like a dog, or to squawk harshly, like a bird. Walt Whitman famously employed the onomatopoeic term in *Leaves of Grass*—“I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world”—and Bowen’s use of it is resolutely barbaric. The bomb’s final act, as it were, is in the “cataracting roar of a split building,” which designates with sheer physical force the horror of noise. While the incendiary conclusion indicates a momentary reprieve in so far as the bomb detonates “somewhere else,” the admission of a “direct hit” (which echoes “split”) captures the guilt that accompanies relief and lends further credence to Bowen’s intersubjective claim that she had more difficulty during wartime discerning where her self stopped, and where other selves began. While “I” am safe, others are not.

The night raid erases the initial exchange between Stella and Robert, replacing it with the deafening bomb effects. Bowen captures the fantasy of modern technological war in the intense description of the glissade: an explosive unit measured by weight whose effect multiplies exponentially upon impact, rendered here with catastrophic resonance. The narrator describes the aftermath of the bomb as one that bears as much

on memory as on the structural integrity of the club, both distorted: “It was the demolition of an entire moment: he and she stood at attention till the glissade stopped. What they *had* both been saying, or been on the point of saying, neither of them ever now were [sic] to know. Most first words have the nature of being trifling; theirs from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue” (104). The blurring of boundaries is instituted in the grammar of the description itself, as the subject moves from the plural (both) to the singular (neither) but retains the plural form of the verb (were). Their love begins in the moment erased by war, their first words muted by the roar of a bomb. Even as they do begin to speak to each other, “what they said instead, they forgot: there are questions which if not asked at the start are not asked later; so those they never did ask” (104). Bennett and Royle capture the paradox neatly: “This moment of demolition, this demolition of a moment, bears a significance which can never be either known or forgotten” (95). In a novel steeped in the intrigue of passing secrets to the enemy, conversations carry the weight and force of plot.

Though Robert and Stella’s son Roderick both share conservative viewpoints, they differ on the point of conversation. Roderick and Robert disdain what they consider the noise of modern civilization and democracy. As Roderick marvels at the serenity of Cousin Nettie’s surroundings—she is in Ireland—and the “sidelong glitter of reason” to their afternoon conversation, he realizes that “inside this closed window was such a silence as the world would probably never hear again—for when war did stop there would be something more: drills right through the earth, planes all through the sky, voices keyed up and up. The air would sound; the summer-humming forest would be

torn” (241).<sup>6</sup> Roderick is reacting to the promise of modernization following the war, in which the air will hum with industry—not unlike the air over London during the blitz. Considering his own legacy in Ireland, Roderick laments the legacy of noise. The racket of war heralds the end of a quiet civilization for Roderick.

Robert’s fascist sympathies expose a more politically conservative view that laments the governing path of modern liberal democracy. Conversation or debate (“quibbling”), the desideratum of rational liberal democracy, is precisely what Robert has had enough of: “I want the cackle cut” (318). The “voices keyed up and up” that Roderick laments is not quite the same as the “cackle” Robert wants cut. For Roderick, all problems and solutions are the result of conversations. When he and Stella discuss the note found in Robert’s dressing-gown, and the value of taking notes on conversations, Roderick emphasizes his belief that “conversations are the leading thing in this war! Even I know that. Everything you and I have to do is the result of something that’s been said. How far do you think we’d get without conversations?” (67). During the war, London was strewn with posters accusing that “Careless Talk Costs Lives.” The posters depicted men and women gossiping with the enemy (Rau 34, 35-41). Everyone, and particularly Robert, is suspicious of even the most innocuous conversation. Indeed, Roderick surmises, someone in Robert’s position likely has “conversations *about*

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<sup>6</sup> Bowen discusses the silence of Ireland during the war in *Bowen’s Court*: “Bowen’s court, in that December of 1941 in which this book was finished, still stood in its particular island of quietness, in the south of an island country not at war. Only the wireless in the library conducted the world’s urgency to the place. Wave after wave of war news broke upon the quiet air of the room and, in the daytime when the windows were open, passed out on to the sunny or overcast lawns. Here was a negative calm—or at least, the absence of any immediate physical threat. Yet, at the body of this house threats did strike—and in a sense they were never gone from the air. The air here had absorbed, in its very stillness, apprehensions general to mankind. It was always with some qualification—most often with that of an almost undue joy—that one beheld, at Bowen’s Court, the picture of peace. Looking, for instance, across the country from the steps in the evening, one thought: ‘*Can* pain and danger exist?’ But one did think that. Why? The scene was a crystal in which, while on [sic] was looking, a shadow formed” (qtd. in Lassner 152).

conversations” (67), something Stella is secretively all too familiar with in her dealings with Harrison and through her work at the Ministry of Information.

During such intense conversations in the novel the relationship between noise and language bristles to the surface. According to Robert, betraying Britain to the Germans is less severe than Stella imagines it, for in his mind, there are no countries left to betray, only “[e]xhausted shadows” (301).<sup>7</sup> Robert’s disaffection with Britain drives at what he calls the “racket” of “Freedom”: the freedom to be “muddled, mediocre, damned” (302). Freedom, to Robert, is “inorganic” (302). It is nothing but an empty promise. Robert leaves Stella with a “hangover” from the word, explaining to her that language is but a “dead currency” (301): all talk, in Robert’s view, is careless talk. It is meaningless because the order of things from which it derives meaning and to which it refers is bankrupt. “We must have something to envisage, and we must act, and there must be law” (302). Robert understands language, according to Phyllis Lassner, as “undecipherable noise” that “provokes such anxiety that it moves men to yearn for unbreakable law, unambiguous order” (*Elizabeth Bowen* 127). To emphasize his immunization to the vacuity of dead words Robert repeats them: “saying them to myself over and over again till it became absolutely certain they mean nothing” (301). In a sense, he runs down their meanings. He elaborates this point by repeating the question he poses to Stella: “This is a shock to you, Stella? Or, is it a shock to you?” (301). Read on the page, the questions are nearly identical; and yet, with the inflection of Robert’s voice and the context of the conversation they in fact indicate both irony and surprise,

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<sup>7</sup> Bowen has been criticized for not presenting Robert’s betrayal more convincingly, though Barbara Watson (139) and John Coates, among others, defend the looseness of Robert’s reasoning as a “deliberate device” (“Rewards” 495).

drastically different reactions to the same situation.

The destruction of this initial conversation between lovers resurfaces when Robert and Stella confront the unseemly truth about his espionage. Though the question is never uttered in the text, Stella puts the question to Robert about his purported treason, which he does not deny: “Not a sign, not a sound, not a movement from where she at a distance from him lay, exhausted by having given birth to the question” (300). When he does speak again, Stella becomes aware of something lying just below the surface of discourse, a discovery that arises through a peculiar trajectory of sound. Stella, taken aback by Robert’s speech, suffers a kind of blockage, both in her line of sight and in her memory, so that Robert’s face suddenly becomes imperceptible.<sup>8</sup> Not unlike their first moment obliterated by the bomb, Stella loses her perception of Robert because of the figurative bomb he drops on her in his treasonous admission. The shift is registered through a change in his voice:

The direction from which the voice came seemed so set back in distance as to be polar; the voice itself was familiar only in more and more intermittent notes: it was as though some undercurrent in it, hitherto barely to be detected, all the time forbidden and inadvertent, had come to the top. He did not speak fast, but the effect was of something travelling at the rate of light between word and word. Now he first drew in an audible breath, then moved: the sounds of physical movement came as a shock, reminding her that he after all was a presence here in the room—

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<sup>8</sup> Jilted lovers and broken romances manifest erasure in several of Bowen’s books. In *The Last September*, at the end of the dance at the Rolfes’ hut, Lois “watched Gerald,” but “she could not see him” or “remember him” (158). Gerald is no longer distinct to Lois, his mouth “no different from mouths of other young men who had also been strolling and pausing between the huts in the dark” (158).

feet, their naked soles sucking at place after place across the thick neutral carpet, could be heard walking with a hallucinated precision towards the window. He pulled the curtains back. (303)

In a sense, Stella has moved into the position of Harrison in this love triangle, and by doing so has taken on his abilities to hear within apparently familiar sounds a coded message. Whether it is the final truth about Robert or some other kind of propaganda that Stella detects in his speech, or the encroachment of the foreign into what was once familiar, is unclear. The moment replays the effects of their initial encounter where erasure is the keynote. Ironically, Stella recognizes Robert's infidelity while lying in bed, though the injury is not one of lovers, but of citizens who purport to share the same political reality: "All fears shrank to this cold bare irrefutable moment: she shivered indifferently between the sheets. It had been terror of the alien, then, had it, all the time?" (308). The moment that was first obliterated between them is here instituted, irrefutable, unforgettable, true. Robert has been existing, Stella thinks, on a slightly different plane than the rest of them, knowing what he knows. The similar movements of Londoners in the city under bombardment, their "curious animal psychic oneness" and the "war-warmed impulse of people to be *a* people had been derisory" to Robert, she imagines: the "current *had* been against his face" (309). He, with his "nerve in reverse" (310), would hear all broadcasts, all propaganda, all news, differently.

Politics inhabits silence even, or especially, between lovers during war: Stella is figured as giving birth to the question of treason, and their bed, on which she lies and on which he sits, is marred, suddenly, by infidelity. Though Harrison stood in Stella's flat as the perpetual foreigner, a "German in Paris" (46), it is now Robert who seems "blotted



out" (303). Recollecting their first encounter following the glissade, Stella marvels at the "supernatural nearness to her of Robert's face" (105), which she studies: "In the unfamiliar the familiar persisted like a ghost" (107). Following the revelation of his treason, Stella, for the moment, cannot conceive of the look of his face (303). While Harrison's quietness had reached an extreme of foreignness, Robert's de-familiarization and dissolution through "intermittent notes" wipes him out completely, if only for the moment. Stella realizes the fluidity of identity in the process, and of the open border that exists between public and private worlds. At the apex of her war-time love triangle, Stella entertains a startling thought: "It seemed to her it was Robert who had been the Harrison" (310)—he, not Harrison, is the infidel.<sup>9</sup> "Love depends on alterity," Petra Rau argues, "but strives to abolish it at the same time" (48).

The acoustic effects of Robert's speech create a parallel with the couple's first interrupted encounter. This time, against Stella's wishes, nothing intervenes: "She thought or hoped she heard, somewhere between the stars and herself, the hum of a plane tracing its own course; but the sound, if it ever had been a sound, died: nothing intervened" (303-4).<sup>10</sup> Stella hopes for the returning raiders in order to obliterate the moment, to enable the two lovers to forget their conversation. Though the passage only loosely approximates the staccato punctuation and unusual syntax of the bombing passage, the effects are much the same: like the detonation that obliterates their first moment from memory, so Robert's admission of betrayal obliterates *him* from Stella's

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<sup>9</sup> Upon reading a newspaper about Robert's death, Louie wonders "whether it might not be Harrison who had fallen, under another name" (344). As Louie struggles to fall asleep, she thinks about Stella Rodney: "Louie felt herself entered by what was foreign. She exclaimed in thought, 'Oh no, I wouldn't be *her*!' at the moment when she most nearly was" (278).

<sup>10</sup> When Harrison suddenly reappears at Stella's new flat some years later, Stella thinks that the "lofty drumming of the raider" might offer another end to their meeting, but "nothing fell" (360).

perception. The positioning of the colon is essential to the delay, the pause and shift in time that conveys the transition from danger to safety: “cataracting roar of a split building: direct hit, somewhere else” (104). Stella wishes for the same relief, but “sound, died: nothing intervened” (304). Stella cannot, however, forget this moment with Robert. The emphasis on sound in this passage deepens the impact of the blackout, both literally and figuratively. What Robert refers to as “sight in action”—he acts therefore he sees—is precisely what is blacked out for Stella. Together they realize the failure of language to convey the truth; the failure of language during the war to represent adequately, “in so many words” (304). As Phyllis Lassner points out, “Language in this novel communicates only uncertainty” (*Elizabeth Bowen* 123).

In addition to the falling bombs that interrupt their initial encounter and the figurative “bomb” that Robert drops when he admits his treason, there is a third falling that wipes out its remainder: Robert’s “fall or leap” from Stella’s roof (327). According to Lassner, the uncertainty surrounding his death “confirms the failure of language to construct absolute boundaries of difference. He disappears from the narrative in ambiguity” (*Elizabeth Bowen* 125). The circumstances of his death remain shrouded in silence. Once Robert left the flat and scampered up to the roof Stella, for the first time that evening, heard “not so much a step as the semi-stumble of someone after long standing shifting his position” (326). Robert had been tailed, most likely by Harrison whose motives for waiting in the doorway are as personal as they are political.

Robert’s death incurs a silencing of its own, a political one that subsequently silences Stella’s own private tragedy as well. The day has barely begun when news breaks of advances in Africa and “victorious bell-ringing: throughout the country every steeple

was to break silence” (327). In heralding victory abroad, the bells silence a personal loss at home, the necessary sacrifice to history. The truth of Stella’s narrative is silenced as the church bells break theirs: at the moment when church and state are synchronous, the private tragedy is suppressed. History subsumes the personal loss, the private narrative.

Describing the ringing bells, the narrator reverses the trajectory of sound traced by the falling bomb: “When at last it came, the bells’ sound was not as strange or momentous as had been expected: after everything these were still the bells of the former time, climbing, striving, searching round in the air in vain for some still not to be found new note. All that stood out in cities were unreverberating lacunæ where there were churches gone” (327). Though not reduced merely to noise, the bells nonetheless do not bring about the sought-after effect. The bells fail to relieve because they signify a time that is gone forever, hailing listeners to a time before the war. Moreover, the bells ring hollow in the empty architectural shells and ruins across Europe where churches once stood. Since most ruins left by the bombing barrages are no longer complete structures, they no longer resound even if hollow: sound cuts through them rather than reverberates within them or from them. Hence, the new note of rebirth, of renewed faith, reverberates instead with loss. In other words, redemption and salvation, at least in terms of the spirit, are notes that cannot be struck by these bells, these bells of a time before the war, before everything changed. The loss of churches, and the loss of belief, is too graven. What remains is the “insidious echoless propriety of ruins” described by the narrator when the war “moved from the horizon to the map” in the interim between 1940 and 1942. The unsettling diagnosis of London in a state of “deadening acclimatisation” to war proffered by the narrator—when war is no longer a nightly

caller—isolates the effects this has on the consciousnesses of the city inhabitants, “a consciousness that no longer resounded” (100). Londoners, it seems, had been conditioned from the outset of the war to disbelieve. In the third chapter of *War Begins at Home* (1940), Tom Harrisson notes the way false alarms and false reports of German victories increased the “general tendency to believe the wildest rumour, or, conversely, to believe nothing at all” (“Shadows” 70).

Though the bells ring to bring people out of the “lightless middle of the tunnel,” to give them faith in something other than a slogan “desperately re-worded to catch the eye” (100), the faith-renewing effects of the bells are, at best, temporary. The ringing bells embody an explicit intent, however much that intent is supposed to be a transcendental one. Intent is something immanent in sound as represented by Bowen. As the notes of the bells ascend toward heaven, so is the spirit to soar. The bells are met with a certain hesitancy or confusion, which is also presented in the text by way of synaesthesia. People initially accept the “invitation to rejoice,” and witness the bells in the streets “as though the peals and crashes were a spectacle to be watched passing: eyes for a moment seemed to perceive a peculiar brightness” (327), as if squinting at their loudness; but the “illusion” does not last, and people move indoors, knowing full well the sound must inevitably “fade” (327, 328). The metaphor of the tunnel returns: Londoners are so used to the lightless middle of the tunnel, the blackout nights and grey mornings, that the notes of victory come with a “peculiar brightness” which overwhelms the senses since it has been so long since they were accustomed to light and to victory. Hence, people moved “indoors again: doors and windows shut” (328). Recurrent trauma builds a chamber around the familiar.

Like the housemaid in Bowen's short story, "Oh, Madam," whose employer is evacuating her home after a bomb blast, individual stories of loss get swept up in the general, historical act of recovery. The maid is, of course, left behind. She ironically notes that "this never did feel to me a lonely house" (CS 582). The story is comprised of the maid's side of a dialogue only. The focus on a single voice lends ear to the tragic stories blanketed with the dust of official history. Bowen reproduces the one-sided dialogue effect when Stella is interrogated by the authorities regarding Robert's sudden death. Jordan suggests that the "most important moral decisions taken in *The Heat of the Day* hinge upon the choice between silence and speech. The crux of the plot follows from the silence that ensues when words have been betrayers and have thereby lost their ability to signify" (165). Stella wants to see Harrison in order to sound out the truth, to separate her story from the official silence, but he does not appear: "Ultimately, it was *his* silent absence which left her with absolutely nothing. She never, then, *was* to know what had happened? For, with regard to Robert the silence from behind the scenes never broke: what was most to be noted about his death was its expediency—the country was spared a demoralising story; everything now could be, and was, hushed up" (340). Stella is not spared, but the country is; officially, Robert dies by misadventure. Stella's monologue testifies to the impossibility of justice and closure. Her testimony is rendered in the form of a monologue in which the interlocutor has been elided, her responses separated by ellipses: "...I am not quite clear what you mean by "matters of a confidential nature." Naturally we did not discuss his work: I did not expect that. ... Not secretive about his personal affairs, no. He did not give me the impression of having anything to hide" (342). The one-sided dialogue goes on for pages. Stella's monologue fascinates because

of its dialogic quality, despite the fact that the official questioner has been elided. The reader is prompted to fill in the questions, as if the answers have always been clear, and only the questions remain to be figured in and out. Moreover, much like Molly Bloom's concluding monologue in *Ulysses* and Clarissa Dalloway's stream-of-consciousness in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Stella's monologue is a critique of modernism insofar as it testifies to the presence of the subject more than it does the veracity of events. The subject emerges in language, but she also disappears in it. Ironically, Stella leaves the coroner's court with "one kind of reputation, that of being a good witness" (344). But to what does Stella testify, and to what does she bear witness?

Like her initial meeting with Robert, Stella's final encounter with Harrison occurs against the intermittent sounds of warfare during the night. Coming in from the "pulse of silence" and the "bark of guns" (355) upon arriving at Stella's new flat, Harrison learns that Stella herself was merely "reading, listening to the guns" (356), as if the two endeavours went hand in hand.<sup>11</sup> During their momentous scene, Robert had said to Stella: "Don't quarrel now, at the end, or it will undo everything from the beginning. You'll have to reread me backwards, figure me out—you will have years to do that in, if you want to" (304). Robert's disaffection and espionage calls for narrative, not conversation. Bennett and Royle discuss the doubling effects in the novel as "retrolexic," a rereading or re-experiencing that does not coincide with itself (89). Though Harrison wishes to believe it all "Quite like old times" (356), with bursts of gunfire shaking the building and a "stick of bombs [falling] across the middle distance" before it all died

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<sup>11</sup> In "Calico Windows," Bowen comments on the care taken by the workmen to safe-keep one's belongings: "the telephone has been rolled up inside a mattress; your place in the book you were reading when the bomb went off has been religiously marked with a leg that blew off the sofa; more books are in the bath" (*PPT* 184).

down again, Stella remarks that it had rather all ““come back different”” (358), a comment that also refers to Harrison’s return and recuperation of the past. And like Stella’s admission always “to have left things open,” the narrative arc that brings Harrison and Stella back together in her cross-town flat also remains ambiguously open-ended: ““Or would you rather I stayed till the All Clear?”” (363). Hence, this narrative line ends waiting for the sound of recovery; the reader does not stay with Stella and Harrison for the all-clear siren to sound, for the past, for them, is anything but clear. They remain frozen in the trauma of night and war, amidst the silence of books and the noise of guns. Louie, not Stella, carries the narrative more explicitly towards recovery.

While the church bells search out their new notes in vain, the radio in turn signals the desired-for notes of victory and rescue. What Louie thought she found in the rising tenor of the bells on Stella’s street is broadcast in a wireless chorus across a host of radios. As the news of the Allied success (D-Day) reaches the streets outside Louie’s window, voices became “multiplied, one voice from dozens of radios came lancing across and across itself out of dozens of windows standing open” (370). Even the pronoun “itself” confuses the plural voices with the singular. Though the doors and windows are shut shortly after the church bells ring out, they are open for a moment. Apart from the multiple voices in the street, the chiastic structure of the sentence echoes the merging of these voices with the one voice of the wireless, cutting across itself from set to set, window to window. The wireless delivers what the church bells could not—a kind of inter-subjective experience where the transmitted and the live conjoin, of the kind that Robert does not believe exists amongst free individuals. But while the church bells might have failed before, at this news there was a “movement into churches,”

however “unco-ordinated” it was (371). The radios do what the church bells could not. As the new pulpit of the nation, the radio allies multiple families and heralds unity.

But the war is not over yet. The church bells are superseded by the wireless, and the broadcast is superseded by a return to the mind at war, a mind haunted by its own echoless sonority. Consciousness becomes what it is not, a symptom of the uncanny: “The unexpected-expected day, with its feeling of elsewhere-ness, ran its broadcast-echoing course. You could not take back what had been done. The lucid outgoing vision, the vigil for the fighters, lasted ten days more, till the Secret Weapon started: then, it was shameful how fear wrenched thoughts home—droning *things*, mindlessly making for you, thick and fast, day and night, tore the calico off London, raising obscene dust out of the sullen bottom mind. There was no normal hour. [...] On and off, on and off sounded the sirens in the nightmare sunlessness [...]” (371). Petra Rau suggests that for many writers during the Second World War—Woolf, Smith, Greene, Green, and Bowen—“war *is* the uncanny” (32). Everything comes to the surface, again. The paradox “unexpected-expected” is one of Bowen’s finest for capturing the experience of the blitz: that “feeling of elsewhere-ness” is precisely the paradoxical, hyphenated experience during war. One knows what to expect each day, and yet each day is entirely unexpected. Comparing the day with the radio is astutely put: there were things one could expect to hear every time the wireless was switched on, and yet so much to hear that one could never have expected. And everyone owns a radio. Moreover, the “elsewhere-ness” of here is figured in the technology of the radio itself: the broadcast from elsewhere that reverberates in the here, the very notion of the echoing broadcast diminishing the notion of enclosed, identifiable, boundary-drawn here. Once again, alliteration and assonance,



together with Bowen's peculiar rhythm, are pronounced throughout the passage. The syntax runs its own zigzag course: sentences are slowed and checked by punctuation, then a clause emerges unchecked, only to have the next stuttered with commas. Evident also is the harshness of juxtaposition: thick and fast, day and night, on and off. The reprieve is momentary, replaced by the "outgoing vision" and the resumption of all that has come before, only this time there are the ruins and the dust that have sullied consciousness to be torn up by these "droning *things*, mindlessly making for you"—the V2 rockets, a long-awaited secret weapon that remained secret even after it began to crash into London. Because the V2s were undetectable and did not give off a warning noise like the V1s or bombing raiders, "The London public learnt to live with a situation which provided permanent underlying unease rather than acute momentary fear" (Balfour 383). The V2s were demoralizing, not unlike intermittent raiding—rather than sustained attack—which gave the public "time to think and found it harder to adjust again when the next series began" (Balfour 204). There is no "normal hour" because emergency has become routine: "The disaster that arrives and the disaster that may be about to arrive have equal powers here to engender a 'collective psychosis'; the real war and the rehearsal for war become psychotically indistinct" (Saint-Amour 131). The reverberation and half-life of the secret is tantamount to the narrative of war in *The Heat of the Day*. Bowen uses the rubric of sound as an objective correlative for the radically destabilized existence of Londoners and their battered consciousnesses.

But Bowen also provides a veritable Hollywood ending to the novel, one which models Louie as the new post-war woman. Louie returns with her newborn son Tom to Seale-on-Sea and her family home, where the sea "glittered as though nothing had

happened” (372), as if blessed with some kind of forgetfulness that going “elsewhere” brings. In stark contrast to the “sunlessness” that overshadows the war-time scenes in London, Louie basks in the sun at the seashore. The order of things has been righted: instead of the “pool of night” and the “sunlessness” of days, the water reflects the sun with a blinding forgetfulness, marking the emergence from the lightless middle of the tunnel. The forgetfulness that troubles Stella’s love affair with Robert becomes a virtue for helping one move beyond the clamour of war. Forgetting will be forgiveness, not erasure. Earlier in the novel, Stella thought of the “two most poignant seasons” upon her visit to Holme Dene: “in spring, in autumn everything telegraphs its mystery to your senses; nothing is trite. And more: in these years the idea of war made you see any peaceful scene as it were through glass” (114). Nature here seems to have been removed from behind the glass, or perhaps all the glass has been shattered and swept away.

Yet the emphasis in the final lines falls on memory and remembrance: “A minute or two ago our homecoming bombers, invisibly high up, had droned over: the baby had not stirred—every day she saw him growing more like Tom. But now there began another sound—she turned and looked up into the air behind her. She gathered Tom quickly out of the pram and held him up, hoping he too might see, and perhaps remember. Three swans were flying a straight flight. They passed overhead, disappearing in the direction of the West” (372). Bowen’s prose has straightened itself out, its convolutions and distortions laid flat. The “droning *things*” that threatened London above are replaced here by “our homecoming bombers,” and the fear that tore London and its citizens apart with the dreadful sounds of rockets and sirens is substituted with what amounts to a lullaby, the sky returned to the innocent wonder of flight. The

impersonality of “*things*” is replaced by the possessive, and inclusive, “our” (one of those curious non-diegetic moments for the narrator, like the “in here” of earlier). The soldier Tom, killed on the field, is replaced by infant Tom, product of the way war throws people together. This heraldic ending is fitted also with a new sound and image: the rockets and bombers, the broadcasts and sirens, are replaced by the sounds of the three swans signalling the rebirth of the West. Just as the novel begins with a theatrical scene in the park, this England-by-the-sea scene concludes the novel with civilizing sound. Saint-Amour suggests that Woolf and Doblin incarnate the novel as “air-raid siren” (156). The modern novel warns against future damage. While it archives the damaged city, *The Heat of the Day* signals the all clear.

### Chapter Three: Evelyn Waugh, Culture, and Noise

“In antiquity there was only silence. In the nineteenth century, with the invention of the machine, NOISE was born. Today, NOISE triumphs and reigns supreme over the sensibility of men.” ~ Luigi Russolo

Modern noise irritated Evelyn Waugh, though it provided him with an ironic conceit for embattled civilization and cultural decline. Like other cultural critics of the 1930s, Waugh took noise as a disturbing sign of the incompetent regime of modernity. Noise assumes a negative if highly comedic value in his work, one that captures the essential ambiguity of what it means to be modern. Waugh represents a host of noise-producing devices—motorcycles, telephones, radios, drums, sirens, and bombs—that signal his larger concerns with the direction of culture increasingly mediated by technology, media, and politics. Primitive noises figure the clash of civilization and barbarism in the relation of English and non-English peoples and in the death drive Waugh considers the manifest expression of modern technology. Culture is in disrepair, but those empowered to remedy it only exacerbate its decline: “pure Waugh,” George McCartney points out, “became shorthand for describing ludicrously excessive behavior perpetrated by those in a position to know better” (“Introduction” xii). Waugh’s novels and travel books of the 1930s imagine and document the “culture racket”: the formations, clashes, and breaking apart of culture. While Waugh lampoons the notion that culture can modernize and improve the political integrity of a fledgling nation in *Black Mischief* (1932), he takes a similar line of argument in *Waugh in Abyssinia* (1936), his travelogue of that region that boasts the benevolence of the Italian invasion.

Waugh’s particular brand of cultural criticism—which is not, despite appearances, simply reactionary—conjoins the modernist desire for renovation with a conservative

regard for traditional values.<sup>1</sup> He deplored noise but found its metaphorical and symbolic values irresistible. While F. R. Leavis in *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* believes the most critical aspects of a culture are kept by a shrinking minority, Waugh is adamant that the minority entrusted with preserving traditional values can no longer uphold them. In fact, the minority contributes to decline. Waugh's ridicule of the privileged who squander cultural inheritance includes the guardians of culture as well. As Lisa Colletta suggests, in works of dark humour, it is easier to laugh at the death of an idle aristocrat than it is at the death of an exploited miner (Colletta 5). Unlike Orwell, Waugh does not believe in the "common man" as a foundation for social and political thought, and places more stock in the devout individualists and social climbers like Basil Seal and Charles Ryder.

The cultured and the noisy merge in several of Waugh's characters. Anthony Blanche's stuttering recitation of *The Waste Land* through a megaphone in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) and aesthete Ambrose Silk's similar amplification of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in *Put Out More Flags* are two examples. Basil Seal, Waugh's hero manqué in that latter novel as well as in *Black Mischief*, is a riotous case in point. Always emerging from one racket or another, Basil is a cipher for noise. Basil manifests both senses of the term "racket": as raucous, riotous, boisterous behaviour (*BM* 67); and as ruthless, cunning, manipulative scheming (*POMF* 37, 220). A first-rate satirist, Waugh's deployment of characters like Basil and Ambrose indicates his belief in the enduring qualities of minority culture, and their ends. Much of the comedy in Waugh's novels of the 1930s and 1940s derives from the obliviousness of his characters to the noisy,

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Schweizer finds Waugh's deep-seated "reverence for authority and order" indicative of "rightest ideology," "straightforward conservatism," and "cultural pessimism, the hallmark of conservative thought" (37).

anarchic world that engulfs them. The noise Waugh encounters abroad in his travel writing is presented with wit and humour in the early books. In *Waugh in Abyssinia* and *Robbery Under Law* (1939), however, noise takes on political significance, and even signals alarm.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss Waugh's preoccupation with the noise of modern technology and cultural entropy in *Vile Bodies* (1930). Culture and technology mirror one another. While Orwell focuses on the lower end of the social order, where noise signifies emergent cultures and social discontent, Waugh concentrates on the upper classes, where noise indicates excess and cultural myopia. In the second part of the chapter, I argue that off-shore noises in Waugh's travel writing crystallize conflict. Travel brings mixed emotions and reflections; departures and homecomings are loaded with significance. *Labels* (1930) and *Remote People* (1931) bristle with disquiet upon homecoming while *Ninety-Two Days* (1934) is rife with expectation; noises disturb easy distinctions between civilization and barbarism, the familiar and the remote. Waugh's initial aimlessness in travel becomes increasingly focused and polemical. Destinations reinforce beliefs. Waugh's concerns with cultural decline at home lead him to witness the anarchy in Mexico abroad, where he finds a disturbing echo of the lawless noise of Central Europe: and a warning for England. The "racket" of travel writing indicates a noisy genre that records experience and depicts foreign soundscapes. Waugh's suggestion that all journeys "begin and all end with a sense of unreality" (*Ninety-Two Days* 397) implies something potentially deceptive about departures and homecomings. Travel abroad is a guise for the politics of home.

Waugh's conservatism pits him against modern liberalism and what he sees as its

offshoots in the culture racket: anarchy, hypocrisy, phoniness. The lack of correspondence between how things are, and how they appear, is the target of Waugh's satire. In "Converted to Rome," Waugh suggests that "civilization—and by this I do not mean talking cinemas and tinned food, nor even surgery and hygienic houses, but the whole moral and artistic organization of Europe—has not in itself the power of survival" (*Essays* 103). It requires preservation and direction. Modern liberal democracy is misguided and reckless for valuing "talking cinemas and tinned food" over and above the cultural integrity of Europe. Waugh's own individualistic conservatism does not prevent him from critiquing reaction and staunch traditionalism in others, as his many satires evince.

George McCartney's *Confused Roaring* reclaims Waugh for the modernist camp, but only with its own measure of confusing ambivalence. For Waugh, McCartney suggests, the ear and the eye are diametrically opposed, and the only culture that enters through the ear is savage, barbaric, and primitive (160). Waugh's works represent a "contemporary world in which the fine discrimination of a literate, visual culture seemed to be in the process of being submerged by the featureless sensate life of a semiliterate, even illiterate, aural culture filled with the confused roaring of a technologically dependent people heedless of their origins in the generations that had preceded them" (McCartney 158). Noise, predominantly negative in Waugh's imaginative worlds, serves a critical, informative function in his writings. Characters mishear and misunderstand the noises around them. In *Put Out More Flags*, which I discuss in Chapter Four, Waugh's engagement with noise as both a satirical device and a political trope is much more sophisticated. My reading of Waugh, then, recuperates the audible dimension of his work

alongside that of Elizabeth Bowen and George Orwell.

In *Decline and Fall* (1928), Waugh's first novel, the unsuspecting Paul Pennyfeather is victimized by a youthful mob. The narrative hinges on noise, as the plot is generated by the "confused roaring and breaking of glass" (1) that first emerges from the room of Sir Alastair Digby-Vaine-Trumpington as schoolmasters Sniggs and Posthlewate idly listen. The novel teems with polysyllabic names that clatter about the page: "Pennyfeather," "Beste-Chetwynde," "Prendergast," "Clutterbuck," "Cholmondley" (or "Chokey"), names that choke on their own unusual consonant clusters. Several characters at the Llanabba Sports tournament suggest going for dinner at the "Cwmptryddyg" (56). Donald Greene contends that Waugh is "one of the last practitioners of the art of comic descriptive nomenclature" (Greene 25).<sup>2</sup> There comes a point when culture, Waugh implies, becomes decadent and refines *back* itself into barbarism. Hence, not simply aimlessness, but backwardness is ridiculed. The narrator describes the arrival of the Welsh Silver Band in terms betokening evolutionary backwardness, inherent criminality, and cultural anaemia: "Ten men of revolting appearance were approaching from the drive. They were low of brow, crafty of eye and crooked of limb. They advanced huddled together with the loping tread of wolves, peering about them furtively as they came, as though in constant terror of ambush" (80). The spokesman for the silver band speaks in convoluted syntax and grammar: "'To march about you would not like us? [...] we have a fine yellow flag look you that embroidered for us was in silks'" (81). They are represented as subhuman, mute, and primitive; they are almost unintelligible, but intelligible enough to elicit humour. They are

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<sup>2</sup> In a letter to Nancy Mitford in the 1960s, Waugh refers to Graham Greene as "'M. Grisjambon Vert'" (Greene 26).



Welsh.

The circular narrative of *Decline and Fall* mocks the aimlessness of the characters and the culture they preserve. The narrator ironically intones that the raucous behaviour of the Bollinger Club—comprised of “epileptic royalty,” “uncouth peers,” “illiterate lairds” and those “most sonorous of name and title” (1, 2), who, three years ago beat to death a caged fox with champagne bottles—proves “a difficult time for those in authority” (1). More concerned with the fines they will be able to collect in the aftermath, the schoolmasters become captive audience as a “shriller note” rose from the rooms—“the sound of the English county families baying for broken glass” (2)—and the revellers destroy symbolic objects of finer living (a grand piano, cigars, china, a Matisse, a manuscript of poetry) before fixing their savagery on the “uneventful” Paul Pennyfeather (3-4). Paul is forced to run the quad “*without his trousers?*” (6). Paul is subsequently sent down for indecent behaviour. The event propels the narrative which ends with Paul, now a schoolmaster himself, listening to the distant shouts as the Bollinger Club renew their ritual. The point of this recurring “confused roaring” is, then, pointless—only decline and fall. Waugh elaborates his critique of the culture racket in *Vile Bodies*, but focuses the instability more precisely in modern technology.

### **“Unduly Sensitive to Noise”: Infernal Machines in *Vile Bodies***

In *Vile Bodies*, noise reflects the malfunctions and excesses of technology and culture. Technological breakdown mirrors cultural degeneration. The aimlessness of civilization is located in its machines as much as it is in its principal characters. The anarchy and unpredictability of the machine is signalled in the noise it precipitates and

emits. Energies that should otherwise be invaluable to the rejuvenation of Britain after the First World War are wasted. As in *Decline and Fall*, the aristocracy lack purpose and direction in *Vile Bodies* as they endlessly party and gossip. This preoccupation is represented by the ever-present telephone and its function in transmitting rumour and gossip—the noise of high society—in addition to both enabling and hindering communication at a distance. Adam Fenwick-Symes and Nina Blount provide the romantic subplot, an on-again, off-again engagement. The cover of the original Chapman and Hall edition is a cartoon of a race car crashing into or ejecting a woman: Agatha Runcible. Waugh parodies the Futurist's fascination with noisy machines and their shattering effects on human sensibilities. Waugh puts into the hands of his Bright Young People the avant-garde instruments of disruption as a way of inverting their revolutionary potential. *Vile Bodies* concludes in a broken-down limousine mired in the mud of a darkened battlefield as the sounds of battle encroach.

In addition to the static and interference that can corrupt the line, telephones circulate social noise in the form of gossip. Even when characters do have something important to put across in *Vile Bodies*, they wind up in idle chatter. The telephone exacerbates cultural malaise. In *A Handful of Dust* (1934), for example, characters wait in a state of inertia to be rung up because they need the telephone in order to circulate. They require impetus and sonorous gratification just to be. John Beaver, Brenda Last's feeble lover who still resides with his mother, sits “near his telephone most of the day, hoping to be rung up” (8). The telephone also enables characters to report the gossip or dirt about one another: ““Good morning, darling, what's the dirt today?”” (82). In *Vile Bodies*, the interruption-expectation variable of the telephone mediates much of what transpires

between Adam Fenwick-Symes and Nina Blount, such that the marriage plot between the two is regularly interrupted in a comedic on-again, off-again fashion. One telephone conversation, comprising all of chapter eleven, parodies the young lovers and their habit of ringing one another up with minimalist aplomb:

Adam rang up Nina.

“Darling, I’ve been so happy about your telegram. Is it really true?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“The Major *is* bogus?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t got any money?”

“No.”

“I see.”

“Well?”

“I said, I see.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes, that’s all, Adam.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye, Nina.” (183)

The conversation ends, but is taken up again without break in the narrative when “Later Nina rang up Adam” to inform him that she is engaged to be married to their mutual friend, Ginger (183). Information is conveyed, of course, but with minimal dialogue,

hardly the kind of telephone conversation one expects to overhear between two lovers engaged to be married. But like the money Adam needs to marry Nina, the exchange is exactly that, and little more. The ironies are plentiful—especially the repeated “I see”—and heightened by the absence of any clarifying commentary or introjection by the narrator.

The need to produce gossip in *Vile Bodies* results in endless parties and, ultimately, death. Simon Balcairn, the reigning Mr. Chatterbox gossip columnist in the *Excess*, makes the connection explicit when he admits that missing Margot Metroland’s party would be catastrophic: “I may as well put my head into a gas-oven and have done with it” (86). He is ousted from the party and, before he does commit suicide, composes an outrageous column teeming with lies that leads to an “orgy of litigation such as they had not seen since the war” (109). As a result, the younger generation settled mostly out of court, using the proceeds to give a “very delightful party” in a “captive dirigible” (109). Parties produce gossip; gossip produces lawsuits; lawsuits finance new parties; and so on.

Parties in Waugh’s novels are always boisterous. They happen on planes and ships as readily as hospital rooms, bathrooms, and respectable homes, including a prime minister’s. As the narrator describes in a now famous passage:

(... Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties, Greek parties, Wild West parties, Russian parties, Circus parties, parties where one had to dress as somebody else, almost naked parties in St John’s Wood, parties in flats and studios and houses and ships and hotels and night clubs, in windmills and swimming-baths, tea parties at school where one ate muffins and meringues and tinned crab, parties at Oxford where one

drank brown sherry and smoked Turkish cigarettes, dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris – all that succession and repetition of massed humanity. . . . Those vile bodies . . .). (123)

The list, placed inside parentheses, amasses details without differentiation. There is no distinction, just “succession and repetition,” until the humanity of the party goes is “massed” and erased: “Those vile bodies.”<sup>3</sup> They signify a civilization out of control, rife with political and social chatter, and a culture that, both literally and figuratively, cannibalizes itself. *Vile Bodies* charts their entropic demise as they careen towards another war.

The older generation diagnoses this penchant for party-going among the Bright Young People as squandering the opportunity given them by the postwar 1920s. The ironically named Outrage, the on-and-off Prime Minister, contends that “There was a whole civilization to be saved and remade—and all they seem to do is to play the fool” (131). Father Rothschild believes that the problem lies less with the younger generation’s “fatal hunger for permanence” (132) and more with the “radical instability” (133) of the world order. These Bright Young Things misbehave because the things are off-kilter, and they are caught in an entropic dance that can only conclude in another war. The Packard car suspended in the air as it is being loaded for a Channel crossing captures this instability, and is replayed in degraded form by the stranded limousine at the conclusion of the novel. Suspended in the air and mired in the muck of a battlefield, these vehicles,

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<sup>3</sup> According to Silenus in *Decline and Fall*, man ““is never beautiful; he is never happy except when he becomes the channel for the distribution of mechanical forces”” (159), and is “equally alien from the *being* of Nature and the *doing* of the machine, the vile *becoming*!”” (160).

voided of purpose, are potent with disaster.

The paragon of speed and noise is the race car. Part Futurist muse, part embodiment of the death drive, the race car exists on the threshold between being and becoming, sheer force and cataclysm. In *Vile Bodies*, race day is shrouded by noise: the simultaneous sounding of “horns” (164), the unending lines of traffic (165), and the voices keyed up to surpass the PA speaker that broadcasts music and the race (165). Fans research the race course for its most dangerous turns (163), such as Headlong Corner, commonly known as a “death trap” (158). The neighbouring community constructs “unstable wooden forms” (165) on roofs near the dangerous turns and sell tickets. The *Morning Despatch* newspaper organizes the race and provides its trophy, “a silver gilt figure of odious design, symbolizing Fame embracing Speed” (163). Advertisements for loss-of-limb insurance commingle with religious banners that demand blood for the remission of sin, permeating the race with the logic of sacrifice. The probability of disaster is precisely the draw. The spectacle recalls Roman barbarities in the coliseum, though the beast is now a machine, and the roar of the lion a shriek of a high-performance engine. The Sunday drive by the leisure classes has been technologically enhanced to provide deadly entertainment for the middle classes, and the open road is now clogged with traffic and exhaust. The crowds in attendance are “middle rank; a few brought portable wireless sets with them and other evidence of gaiety, but the general air of the procession was one of sobriety and purpose” (163). Intent on spectacle, spectators engage with portable radios to cater to their distractions.

The speed and noise that define the race have disintegrating effects on language. When Adam, Miles, Archie, and Agatha take their breakfast among the race-car drivers,

known affectionately as the Speed Kings, they become immersed in scraps of “highly technical conversation” about the race cars, the race, and past performances (158). The narrator quotes these fragments, which become increasingly less intelligible until they culminate in a “crash”:

“... She wouldn’t tell me her name, but she said she’d meet me at the same place to-night and gave me a sprig of white heather for the car. I lost it, like a fool. She said she’d look out for it too ...”

“... Only offers a twenty pound bonus this year ...”

“... lapped at seventy-five ...”

“... Burst his gasket and blew out his cylinder heads ...”

“... Broke both arms and cracked his skull in two places ...”

“... Tailwag ...”

“... Speed-wobble ...”

“... Merc ...”

“... Mag ...”

“... crash ...” (159)

The passage gradually runs down to the monosyllabic crash, such that the conversation takes on the attributes of the race itself. The acceleration by means of shortened units of speech are suggestive of the effects of speed on verbalization, the narrative collusions with technologies of speed, and the disintegration of language into vocables and ellipses. But the actual noise of the race car, its “shattering roar” (160), has its most profound effects when it is being put together.

Combining primitive energy with modern design, the race car embodies speed,

force, and noise. In a scene steeped in the likelihood of violence and excessive sound, the Bright Young Things join their Speed King listening with his pit crew to the high-performance engine in an area “roped off and the floor strewn with sand as though for a boxing match,” replete with a group of “predatory little boys” (160) skulking around for autographs. The narrator describes how the

engine was running and the whole machine shook with fruitless exertion.

Clouds of dark smoke came from it, and a shattering roar which reverberated from concrete floor and corrugated iron roof into every corner of the building so that speech and thought became insupportable and all the senses were numbed. At frequent intervals this high and heart-breaking note was varied by sharp detonations, and it was these apparently which were causing anxiety, for at each report Miles’ friend, who clearly could not have been unduly sensitive to noise, gave a little wince and looked significantly at his head mechanic. (160)

The noise emitted by the machine affects the structural integrity of the building and of thought itself. Excessive sound overloads the listener so that normal perception and thought are fragmented. Noise overwhelms communication and anaesthetizes the senses. Though Miles’s friend is accustomed to the noise, the sharp detonations that punctuate this unnatural sound nonetheless cause anxiety; no one within earshot is free from its shattering effects. “Apart from the obvious imperfection of its sound,” the narrator suggests, the car gives off the distinct impression of being “singularly unfinished” (160), a result of its advanced state of being. While the excessive noise indicates the power and speed contained within, its discharges resonate with potential breakdown. Unlike



domestic cars, race cars are “*real* cars, that become masters of men; those vital creations of metal who exist solely for their own propulsion through space, for whom their drivers, clinging precariously at the steering-wheel, are as important as his stenographer to a stockbroker. These are in perpetual flux; a vortex of combining and disintegrating units” (161). Because they embody dynamism and instability, race cars threaten the static and stable. The narrator lends them subjective, pronominal agency (“who,” “their”) such that the drivers become not only hangers-on, but syntactically irrelevant. The idea that the drivers give voice and articulation to the cars is plainly false, and even the narrator’s syntax bears the effects of the disorienting noise. They are more real than the drivers who steer them.

The unsettling effects of the race car are felt most acutely by Agatha Runcible, who is forced into the race as a spare driver. The scene lends Freud’s death drive perhaps its most literal and unembroidered depiction in the 1930s. The scene begins in the racing pits with the out-of-place partygoers ignorant of the dangers that surround them in this high-performance arena—especially Agatha, who is repeatedly singled out for her careless smoking habits. Agatha more than once unconsciously tosses her burning cigarette into the vicinity of the drums containing the highly flammable petrol (166). When Marino, a rival and “a real artist” at driving dangerously (168), forces Miles’s friend out of the race, Agatha must take the wheel because she has been designated, rather arbitrarily by her armband, the “Spare Driver.” Tight with drink, Agatha takes the lead, but almost immediately she is disqualified for leaving the course, “apparently out of control” (175). Rocketing into the unknown, Agatha crashes into a neighbouring village square, taking out a civil monument and erecting the automobile wreckage in its stead:

“There it stood, still smoking and partially recognizable, surrounded by admiring villagers” (181). With a surrealist twist, the race car takes the place of historic monument as a monument to speed and noise.

The trajectory of Agatha’s out-of-control race car and the culture of these Bright Young People is the same: both speed towards crash. Following her accident, Agatha somehow takes a train back to London, where she is found the next day, “staring fixedly at a model engine in the central hall at Euston Station” (182). Agatha is traumatized. Touched by speed, she seems incapable of righting herself from its discombobulating effects. She can only explain in a few unintelligible details that she came in a car “which would not stop” (182). Sharing her room with a man who fell out of an aeroplane, Agatha’s recovery is marred by the same recurring nightmare: “I thought we were all driving round and round in a motor car and none of us could stop, and there was an enormous audience composed entirely of gossip writers and gate crashers and Archie Schwert and people like that, all shouting at us at once to go faster, and car after car kept crashing until I was left all alone driving and driving—and then I used to crash and wake up” (187-88). Civilization is a nightmare of being out of control and unable to stop. The uncurbable drive to speed towards cataclysm, signalled by shouts and continuous crashes, makes the situation worse. Human agency seems a passenger, at best, in Agatha’s dream of ruin.

Technology, in a sense, does Agatha in. Infused with the traumatizing effects of break-neck speed, noise, and the circuitous, Agatha keeps a gramophone under her hospital bed—Miles brings her new records so they can party in the room—and her dreams take on filmic properties. Delirious, Agatha hallucinates the race over and over

again, as unconsciousness tips into consciousness: “There was rarely more than a quarter of a mile of the black road to be seen at one time. It unrolled like a length of cinema film. At the edges was confusion; a fog spinning past: ‘*Faster, faster,*’ they shouted above the roar of the engine” (200). Like Emmeline in *To the North* who only wishes to be quiet, Agatha is impelled to speed by “they” and “the roar of the engine.” Agatha, agitated and upset, cannot quiet down; speed and noise overtake as she lies in her hospital bed. But stillness and quiet run counter to the kinetic principles inherent to the race car, the gramophone, and the cinema; stillness and quiet bring death.

Film also plays a darkly comic role in the conclusion of *Vile Bodies*. Colonel Blount’s film projector does not emit unusually loud sounds, but it too breaks down in echo of the crashing race car and prefigures the coming war. Waugh admired the inventiveness of cinema, and claimed that silent film was the only “vital” new art form (*Labels* 8). Waugh employs cinematic techniques in his literary style, especially in *Vile Bodies*. Film is, however, linked with violence in the novel. When Adam visits Doubting Hall, the Colonel’s home, when they are shooting a religious epic film, he is “narrowly missed being run down” (140) when a car screams out of the driveway. Moreover, Adam misunderstands what is meant by “shooting” (141) when he is told that they are shooting the Colonel, thereby confusing violence with art. Exhibition is as equally confusing as production. Initially the Colonel projects the film backwards for his guests: “There was a whirring sound, and suddenly there appeared on the screen the spectacle of four uniformed horsemen galloping backwards down the drive” (209). He then plays the film too fast, as the speed of projection is not synchronized with the original shooting speed; the film appears to speed up during dramatic parts and to slow down during

scenes of inaction. As the projector breaks down, wires fuse and the electricity is knocked out of the home completely.

One breakdown leads to another. Almost as if by a result of the failed projection, the Rector, having felt inclined to listen to the wireless set with no lights to read by, unexpectedly returns to Doubting Hall to broadcast the horrible news: “*War has been declared*” (219). The sudden scene shift to the “biggest battlefield in the history of the world” (220) is bridged by the absence of light. Alone, Adam is surrounded by “unrelieved desolation; a great expanse of mud in which every visible object was burnt or broken. Sounds of firing thundered from beyond the horizon, and somewhere above the grey clouds there were aeroplanes. He had had no sleep for thirty-six hours. It was growing dark” (221). Somehow left without friend or foe and sounds of battle just beyond Adam’s diminished senses, he stumbles across two recurring characters in the narrative: the Major, who owes Adam one thousand pounds but always conveniently disappears when the opportunity to pay arises; and Chastity, one of Mrs. Ape’s Angels—a travelling revival show in which Christian virtues are portrayed by showgirls and prostitutes—from the beginning of the novel and thus returning to that initial “bad crossing” (9). They sip champagne together in a broken-down limousine stuck in the battlefield mud. The cinematic conclusion harnesses the unstable energies depicted throughout the novel and centres them in a centripetal noise that lingers ominously as the narrative ends.

The Daimler limousine sunk in the mud is the final image in *Vile Bodies*, and a fitting one for the immovable centre it provides: in the middle of nowhere, going nowhere, having come from nowhere. The impending sounds of disaster swirl around

the “sad scene” (224). The endless movement of the vile bodies is relocated in noise as these bodies remain stranded. “And presently,” the narrator voices over, “like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle began to return” (224). Citing Terry Eagleton on Waugh’s unproductive satire—i.e. that nothing useful can come of Waugh’s satire because there is nowhere else to turn—Lisa Colletta suggests this is precisely the point of dark humour: “Given Waugh’s ambivalence and capriciousness in the face of tragedy and chaos, there is little for readers to do but laugh in the face of it, for they are presented with no other option from the narrator in the novel” (Colletta 84). The absurdity of the scene prevents it from weighing too heavily on readers; nonetheless, the shift from pure farce to the real sounds and horrors of a European battlefield hearkens back to memories of the First World War and calls upon anxieties of a Second World War to come. The “circling typhoon” of violent noise is a vortex of sound that forcefully reconfigures the themes of aimlessness and unrestraint. Nothing stops in *Vile Bodies*—the parties, the gossip, the noise—unless it is final. The only moment of serenity and relief from the absurdity of cultural decadence and primitive energy is during the two minutes at eleven o’clock on Armistice Day when Adam is at Marylebone and “all over the country everyone was quiet and serious” (65-66). The Bright Young Things squander their inheritance of peaceable silence the best way they know how—in a whirlwind of noise.

Aimlessness, while a negative if comedic element of *Vile Bodies*, is an essential facet of travel. Waugh begins his foray into travel writing rather aimlessly, but finds considerable polemic and purpose as the decade wears on into political crisis. Both Waugh and Orwell wrote at length about their travel experiences in the 1930s, as did Graham Greene, Rebecca West, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood. They all

incorporate travel experiences into their fiction. Foreign wars and political crises make great news and pressing writing matter, as Waugh's *Scoop* satirizes and Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* sets down, but the travel ends in Europe when restrictions are imposed during the Second World War. Waugh wrote five travel books during the decade, and with each book he took a greater interest in the political outcomes of the countries that he visited, most of all his own. Technological advancements in transportation encouraged travel. Waugh claims to despise the "cold and noise" of travelling by air, which he finds "shattering" (9, 11) in *Labels*, but even by sea he sometimes found the "incessant" (NTD 380) noise of rough weather entirely discomforting. In addition to the noise of travel, travel writing is inherently *about* noise in the 1930s.

### Off-Shore Noise and the Racket of Travel Writing

Waugh's novels and travel narratives overlap in the 1930s and 1940s. *Black Mischief* and *Scoop* derive much of their imaginative fodder from Waugh's experiences abroad, as do sections of *A Handful of Dust* and *Brideshead Revisited*. His first travel books are considered by many critics to be his best because of their sense of humour and wit, and the way Waugh's "ironic self-satire" enables him to straddle the line between "wonder" and "discontent" (Fussell 191). They are defined more by the aimlessness of the wandering traveller than the later books, which assume more polemical approaches to the foreign. In *Labels*, Waugh sets out as a novice hoping to accomplish "some serious reading and drawing" (9). "I did not really know where I was going," Waugh admits to the reader in the opening pages (7). In *Remote Places*, Waugh claims that he "went abroad with no particular views about empire and no intention of forming any" (120). But

abroad, one has no choice but to engage “political issues,” for they are implicit in everything (120). Eight years later, in *Robbery Under Law*, Waugh denounces the “humbug of being unbiased” and openly courts the reader with a “political book” (729). “When we go abroad,” he chimes, “we take our opinions with us; it is useless to pretend, as many writers do, that they arrive with minds wholly innocent of other experience; are born anew into each new world” (729). The experience of another culture is always a political one, and Waugh increasingly chooses his destinations to confirm his political opinions about culture. As Stan Smith points out, the 1930s left indelible marks on the consciousness of travel writers, which for many was a kind of “self-schooling” (Smith 3).

The ends of travel, then, are bound up with politics and noise in the 1930s. Everyone seems to agree that Waugh’s views are undesirable.<sup>4</sup> He immerses himself in the grammar and vocabulary of what Maria Torgovnick calls “primitive discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of self and Other” (8). An ensemble of tropes for representing the experience of the other, in primitive discourse the “primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist’s dummy—or so we like to think” (Torgovnick 9). Waugh uses this shorthand throughout his travel writing. Though he treats many of his subjects with irony, he never refrains from the ethnocentric. According to Adam Piette, “Waugh relishes barbarism because it gives him richly comic experience that reflects back favorably on his own pseudo-imperial authority and gaze” (“Travel” 55). Critics are divided on whether or not politics compromise the genre. Paul Fussell argues that they are corrupting, while Bernard

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<sup>4</sup> In general, Waugh is regarded as a “great writer, lousy thinker,” a now tired view according to George McCartney (“Helena” 59). Orwell intended to write a study of Waugh, and expressed something similar in a notebook: “Waugh is abt as good a novelist as one can be (i.e. as novelists go today) while holding untenable opinions” (Carens 48).

Schweizer believes the political is unavoidable and essential to travel writing in the 1930s. He claims that the distinction between political and unpolitical, corrupted and uncorrupted, is in the first place erroneous (Schweizer 55).

Fussell places Waugh in an emergent group of distinctly British writers with “a powerful strain of lawless eccentricity and flagrant individualism” (78). Fussell believes the travel book begins to corrupt as Europe gears up for impending conflict in the second half of the 1930s: “As the bourgeois West starts to lose the precarious coherence it has enjoyed between the wars, the travel book begins to take as one of its aims setting people straight about the situation here or there; it abandons subtlety and irony; it grows political, strident, sentimental, and self-righteous; it begins, as Matthew Arnold says of excessively utilitarian criticism, to subserve interests not its own” (197). For Fussell, Waugh’s politics move in where his humour and wit once reigned. Like Arnold, Waugh is a devout critic of anarchy and a staunch supporter of culture who, not unlike George Orwell, presents himself as a lone voice in the wilderness of public opinion capable of discerning the truth.

By focusing on the noises that disrupt Waugh’s homecomings and the conclusions he draws about foreign cultures and places—and thus the ends of travel—I believe that travel writing in the 1930s is, or is about, a racket. *Labels* and *Remote Places* both end in the disquiet of homecoming. From afar, England is a beacon of European civilization and culture; up close, upon return, its future looks muddled. Waugh suggests in *Ninety-Two Days* that all journeys “begin and all end with a sense of unreality” (397). The unsettling feelings associated with homecoming in Waugh’s early travel books are signalled by unexpected noises. There is no homecoming in *Waugh in Abyssinia* and



*Robbery Under Law*, the books are more treatises, political tracts and cultural documents against barbarism. Less about the journey and more about the lessons or warnings to be extracted, Waugh's late-30's travel books resemble Orwell's, particularly *Homage to Catalonia*. The difference is that Waugh, the narrator-speaker of the travelogue, does not conclude his journey by returning home, but remains exiled abroad, at least politically. Attempting to pass the travel book off as a salve for political and cultural crises, Waugh joins the racket.

The disquieting homecoming narrated in *Labels* is focused on disturbing noises. In *Labels*, Waugh refreshes the "fully labelled" (13) Mediterranean with his unique irreverence and wit. Just before returning to England, Waugh muses on the return to the familiar and the "certain uncontaminated glory in the fact of race, in the very limited and circumscription of language and territorial boundary; so that one does not feel lost and isolated and self-sufficient" (167-68). But two notes unsettle arrival. The first is a wireless report of the early returns on the General Election predicting a Labour landslide—Conservative-held power did in fact swing dramatically to Labour, though without a majority—which presages trouble ahead for the leisure-cruising class: "the deepest gloom and apprehension settled upon the English passengers; many of the elder ones began wondering whether it would be wise to land" (167). Although tongue-in-cheek, Waugh acknowledges "turgid, indefinite feelings of home-coming" (167). The news across the wireless is truly unwelcome to a boatful of pleasure-seeking travellers. The noise of homecoming signals the necessity of facing the politics of home. But the second disturbing note, a doleful foghorn, connects the political and the private. Disturbed and unable to sleep, Waugh awakes to hear the "horn again sounding through the wet night

air. It was a very dismal sound, premonitory, perhaps, of coming trouble, for Fortune is the least capricious of deities, and arranges things on the just and rigid system that no one shall be very happy for very long" (168). Waugh's personal happiness was devastated when his wife, Evelyn Gardner, left him for another man, John Heygate.

The revelation of changes, of increased seriousness and of twists of fate, resonates toward the end of Waugh's third novel, *Black Mischief*. Upon Basil Seal's return to London from Azania (a mild cover for Ethiopia), he learns from his party-going friends that in his absence, "Everyone's got very poor and it makes them duller" (231). "There was a general election and a crisis," Sonia moans, "something about gold standard" (231). Homecoming can be a shock. Like *Labels, Remote People* also ends in disquiet. A "fully accredited journalist" (11), Waugh travels to Ethiopia to observe the coronation of Haile Selassie. Waugh's travelogue is attentive to but critical of the singularity of this emergent empire, and one that is deeply intrigued by the confluence of modernity and barbarity. The book is broken up into two meditations on Empire, and three "nightmares" (boredom, heat, home coming) of travel.

Waugh's "Third Nightmare" in *Remote People* pitches the noise of barbarism in the hub of the civilized world—London. Waugh represents the London homecoming as a stifling descent into a "tight-packed" underground restaurant: "We stepped down into the blare of noise as into a hot swimming-pool, and immersed ourselves" (183). "I was back at the centre of the Empire, and in the spot where, at the moment, 'everyone' was going," he writes sardonically: "Next day the gossip-writers would chronicle the young M.P.s, peers, and financial magnates who were assembled in that rowdy cellar, hotter than Zanzibar, noisier than the market at Harar, more reckless of the decencies of

hospitality than the taverns of Kabalo or Tabora" (184).<sup>5</sup> London is noisier than Zanzibar, though it is not clear whether it outdoes its African counterparts in noise, heat, and inhospitality because it is more civilized, or less so. Waugh even adopts the pose of the gossip-writer for a moment, and might well be parodying the way in which gossip-writers infuse the hum-drum of London with the exotic and the foreign, turning the concrete capital into a jungle landscape, a vortex of civilized and uncivilized energies. Cultural confusion abounds: "Why go abroad?" he asks, rhetorically. "See England first. Just watch London knock spots off the Dark Continent. I paid the bill in yellow African gold. It seemed just tribute from the weaker races to their mentors" (184). Imperialism pays for civilization, though Waugh is, of course, being doubly ironic. The conclusion to the third nightmare spills over by way of this lingering sound, much as the swirling noise does at the end of *Vile Bodies*.

The irony is repeated in *Black Mischief*, which also concludes on an unsettling noise that disturbs distinction between the civilized and the barbaric. Basil Seal, Waugh's unrestrained rakish hero, emerges in the narrative with a surreal hangover: "For the last four days Basil had been on a racket. He had woken up an hour ago on the sofa of a totally strange flat. There was a gramophone playing. A lady in a dressing jacket sat in an armchair by the gas-fire, eating sardines from the tin with a shoe-horn. An unknown man in shirtsleeves was shaving, the glass propped on the chimneypiece" (67). The man asks Basil to leave. The woman seems surprised that Basil is alive. Basil cannot recall why he is there in the first place. "Isn't London hell?" (67), one of them asks. London is hell,

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<sup>5</sup> Waugh's comment in *Ninety-Two Days* would seem to contradict this: dealing with the false adage that the men who "administer distant territories are 'strong and silent,'" Waugh corrects both elements: "As for their silence, it seems to vary in exact inverse ratio to their distance from civilisation. For silence one must go to the pie-faced young diners-out of London; men in the wide open spaces are, in my experience, wildly garrulous" (398).

for Basil, and he decides he needs a break from the unending racket, which is why he goes to Azania to cover the emerging story for the *Excess*. When Basil returns he explains to Sonia Trumpington, “I think I’ve had enough of barbarism for a bit. I might stay in London or Berlin or somewhere like that” (232). Of course, London and Berlin admit their own version of barbarism.

Waugh ridicules the imperial project at the end of *Black Mischief* by concluding with a sense of “unreality” he admits overcomes him at departures and homecomings. Azania, following Seth’s death, becomes a joint protectorate of the English and French. Waugh depicts the harmony of European resolution with irony: “Night over Matodi. English and French police patrolling the water-front. Gilbert and Sullivan played by gramophone in the Portuguese Fort” (237). Policing the water front also, then, is the *Mikado*, the Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera of British imperialism, as the tit-willow song “rang clear over the dark city and soft, barely perceptible lapping of the water along the sea-wall” (238). Violence and sound coalesce in metaphors of water in the novel. Earlier, one of Seth’s attachés is killed and his death-shriek is figured as a wave crashing against a sea wall: “a jet of sound, spurting up from below, breaking in spray over the fort, then ceasing. Expressive of nothing, following by nothing; no footsteps; no voices; silence and the distant beat of the tomtoms” (31). Later, when Boaz is killed, his murder is associated with rain: “A piercing, womanish cry, that mounted, soared shivering, quavered and merged in the splash and gurgle of the water” (226).

While the sea gently laps against the sea wall, the calm induced by the scene does not convey security. The novel begins with the voice of Seth, Emperor of Azania, in dictation (attempting to raise the political status of his country), but ends with the voices

of Azania silenced, replaced instead by the tuneful mockery of the comic opera. The circularity and reproducibility of the imperial project is reflected in the gramophone record. Waugh's primitive discourse repeats the errors of thought that depict the African as violent, inferior, and uncivilized, but the ironies he concludes his travel and fictional books with complicate the association of geographic and cultural remoteness with marginality and the distinction between civilization and barbarism.<sup>6</sup> Though Schweizer grants that Waugh's satire "may appear to cut both ways" (39), he is resolute that the conclusion of *Black Mischief* is "a reactionary wish-fulfillment fantasy" that nonetheless "serves a form of political propaganda" (49). Schweizer reads the conclusion of the novel giving off "impressions of calm and order," as "clearly associated with the benefits of foreign military intervention" since the "waves have literally calmed ..." (50). But in reading this "innocuous" (50) imperialism Schweizer misses the anarchy lurking beneath, signalled in the novel through repeated images of instability and the auditory humour of Gilbert and Sullivan. Concluding sounds approximate disturbance, especially when so contrived.

In *Ninety-Two Days*, Waugh records his days spent in British Guiana where he encounters "a broken and fugitive civilisation" retreating from rather than advancing by means of "uniformed law asserting itself in chaos" (536). The absence of an advanced civilization, however, is what the travel writer seeks. Waugh notes "that it is disappointing to travel a long way and find at the end of one's journey, a well-laid-out

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<sup>6</sup> *Black Mischief* received a scathing review in the Catholic journal, the *Tablet*, which brought forth a response from Waugh in a letter: "The story deals with the conflict of civilisation, with all its attendant and deplorable ills, and barbarism. The plan of my book throughout was to keep the darker aspects of barbarism continually and unobtrusively present, a black and mischievous background against which the civilized and semi-civilized characters performed their parts: I wished it to be like the continuous, remote throbbing of those hand drums, constantly audible, never visible, which every traveller in Africa will remember as one of his most haunting impressions" (*Letters* 77, letter of May 1933; qtd. in Ross 74).

garden city" (390 n1). Differences and otherness are essential to travel, especially in literary form. Waugh explains the travel writer's relationship to the lands he visits through a standard cultural metaphor of relocation, where contradictions of the familiar and the unfamiliar demand interpretation: "there is a fascination in distant and barbarous places, and particularly in the borderlands of conflicting cultures and states of development, where ideas, uprooted from their traditions, become oddly changed in transplantation. It is there that I find the experiences vivid enough to demand translation into literary form" (379). Cultural transplantation appeals to Waugh in his travel writing and in his fiction; the juxtaposition of opposites surge in *Vile Bodies*. Not without irony, Waugh spends a week in the garden city of Bath in aimless leisure upon his return: "Spring was breaking in the gardens, tender and pure and very different from the gross vegetation of the tropics. I had seen no building that was stable or ancient for nearly six months. Bath, with its propriety and uncompromised grandeur, seemed to offer everything that was most valuable in English life; and there, pottering composedly among the squares and crescents, I came finally to the end of my journey" (546). Waugh also employs the garden-flower symbol near the end of *Waugh in Abyssinia*, in praise of the Italian aggression there as civilized development.<sup>7</sup> Travelling abroad confirms Waugh's opinions of minority culture at home, and bolsters his conservative political outlook as the decade turns grey.

The expectation of upheaval upon homecoming creates narrative expectations for

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<sup>7</sup> The "abortive modernism" (591) of incomplete buildings overgrown with vegetation in *Waugh in Abyssinia* is also figured in by the two "rival cinemas" that "stood on either side soliciting patronage through the voices of two vastly amplified gramophones, which played simultaneously from sunset until long after midnight, when the hyenas and wild dogs usurped the silence, howling over the refuse heaps, disinterring the corpses in the public cemetery" (591-92). Rival orders are figured in terms of rival sounds, bruited for dominance, such as the instruments of civilized reproduction against the wild animals that dig up the dead.

Waugh while abroad in *Ninety-Two Days*. The unreality of homecoming can be traumatic: private lives can be shattered, governments can fall, social orders can be disrupted. Trauma echoes through Waugh's travel writing. Early in his journey in Guiana Waugh notes how people were reporting that news of European war had come across the wireless (428). He also meets an expatriate German soldier from the First World War: "I have encountered them, wistful and denationalised as Jews, in Abyssinia, Arabia and East Africa, and they make real to me some of the claptrap of Nazi patriotism" (466). The situation in Germany and the persecution of "undesirables" by the Nazis reverberate with the politics of the interwar years, even abroad. Travel broadens the awareness of crisis much as the wireless spreads news. Toward the end of the narrative when Waugh comes across some newspapers dated within a month of his departure from London, he realizes he "had come to expect every kind of public and private cataclysm, the fall of governments, outbreak of wars and revolutions, the assassination of the royal family, the marriage, parenthood, divorce and death of all my friends" (539). Of course, not much happens in the ninety-two days he is away, as his overly didactic title suggests. "But, even so," he writes, "it was the newspapers more than anything that brought it home to me that my journey was coming to an end" (539). When out of earshot, one misses the political significance of noise, learning of the potential rumblings well after their shock waves have elapsed.

Waugh travelled to Abyssinia-Ethiopia several times. He covered the coronation in 1930 for the *Times* and the *Daily Express*, and returned in 1935 for the *Daily Mail*, and again in 1936 as official guest of Italian occupation, which resulted in his "explicitly rightist, proimperial opinions" (Schweizer 46). Waugh's representation of cultural

difference in *Waugh in Abyssinia* divides noise into two categories: the industrious noise of the Italians that ultimately aims to establish quiet, ordered civilization; and, the primitive noise of the Abyssinian-Ethiopians that runs against the civilizing impulse connotes instead the barbaric and warlike. *Waugh in Abyssinia* is directed at the anti-imperialist left and presents the conflict as one best concluded under Italian rule. Native noise is figured in the war drum. Hostility is “thumped out on the oxhide war-drums” to commemorate past victories over invaders (572). Veterans of the battle “paraded in gala dress, rolling their eyes, whirling their swords, slavering at the mouth, stamping themselves into delirium as they re-enacted the slaughter of that day, yelling of the white blood they had shed” (572). The war drum, like the wireless in Europe, broadcasts propaganda—justifying the cause of war with the Italians—in a “series of single thuds, slow as a tolling bell” (646). The war drum performs a similar function to the church bell, but to Waugh’s ears it resounds only with primitive aggression against civilizing forces.

Waugh simplifies his cultural and political views on the occupation and rival ambitions for Ethiopia-Abyssinia in the symbolic road. While a road in England merely brings noise, in Africa it represents the fruits of civilization: “A main road in England is a foul and destructive thing, carrying the ravages of barbarism into a civilised land—noise, smell, abominable architecture and inglorious dangers. Here in Africa it brings order and fertility” (706). The road runs both ways for Waugh, depending on geography. The road brings sweetness and light in Africa, and paves over the violence used to do so, a civilizing force that extends through an otherwise anarchic wasteland. Italian industry marks an advancement of civilization years ahead of the Abyssinian-Ethiopians. Under Shoan rule, he contends, nothing lasting was built that could match the Italian road



which “has been built in a few months of exceptional difficulty to last for centuries. The workmen followed literally at the heels of the conquering army” (706). Imperialism incorporates industriousness. The Italians’ noble design vastly outreaches native ambition. The civilizing efforts of the Italians are met with barbarism, according to Waugh, and marked by the “graves of seventy civilian workmen who were surprised, unarmed, by an Abyssinian raiding party, and butchered with every traditional atrocity” (706). The contrast between the benevolent European spreading “order and decency” (710) and the savage African could not be stated more plainly.

Waugh’s tub-thumping support for Italian rule draws a genealogical link, following Mussolini’s lead, from the Roman times to the current administration. In Addis, a new city will be “a real ‘New Flower’” that will replace the meaningless ruins of previous rulers and states (712). The metaphor recalls the orderly, quiet garden (as opposed to unruly vegetation, overgrowing everything) that concludes *Ninety-Two Days*. The new city will form an enlightened centre from which civilization will radiate. The Italians, Waugh argues, confer civilization on Abyssinia as the Romans did to “our savage ancestors in France and Britain and Germany, bringing some rubbish and some mischief; a good deal of vulgar talk and some sharp misfortunes for individual opponents; but above and beyond and entirely predominating, the inestimable gifts of fine workmanship and clear judgement—the two determining qualities of the human spirit, by which alone, under God, man grows and flourishes” (712). Presenting the fruits of the civilization in enduring architecture and rewriting the barbarities of imperialism as “some rubbish and some mischief,” Waugh attempts to silence public outrage with a hushing hand of historical determinism: imperialism is never quiet. But the benevolent

civilization and cultural know-how of the Italian occupation, Waugh suggests, transcends its own noise. Waugh negates clear judgment in a weak sleight-of-hand that few commentators have let slip. Fussell condemns most of the book for being uneven, contradictory, incoherent, with a “sillier” ending and “would-be lyrical epilogue” which is, in fact, like a sentimental voice-over in a propaganda film, a “loathsome passage” that “abjures any kind of irony or self-criticism” (198). Schweizer seconds the verdict (54).

Waugh provides his own self-criticism, however, in the form of *Black Mischief*. The novel spoofs and ridicules the notion of transplanting culture and civilization from one centre to another. Seth, Emperor of Azania, is Oxford-educated and determined to lead his people according to European enlightenment:

“I have been to Europe. I know. We have the Tank. This is not a war of Seth against Seyid but of Progress against Barbarism. And Progress must prevail. I have seen the great tattoo of Aldershot, the Paris Exhibition, the Oxford Union. I have read modern books—Shaw, Arlen, Priestley. What do the gossips in the bazaars know of all this? The whole might of Evolution rides behind him; at my stirrups runs woman’s suffrage, vaccinations and vivisection. I am the New Age. I am the Future.” (17)

Seth demarcates his rational learning, speech, and vision from the “gossips in the bazaar,” and takes modernization as the path to earning to his country and people political and cultural integrity on the world stage. “Tanks and aeroplanes. That is modern,” Seth concludes. But one strategy after another fails: the tank is useless because it is too hot (40); the soldiers eat their boots (132); the Azanians misunderstand the propaganda campaign Basil Seal, Minister of Modernization, designs to promote birth

control (129, 146), and so on.

While *Waugh in Abyssinia* is memorable for its untenable defense of an anachronistic imperialism, *Robbery Under Law* deals directly with the noise of politics. The book is consistently criticized for being “monologic and didactic” (Schweizer 57) and for containing “utterly solemn, self-righteous registrations of right-wing political outrage” (Fussell 222). Waugh represents Mexico as an inferno of communist and left-wing “ideologues” (726), in which no conservative opinion exists. The journey takes place in 1938, and sounds of conflict brewing in Europe—the September Crisis—make waves abroad. Waugh sees Mexico as a breeding ground for fascism, and he compares the Cardenas administration to the Nazi administration. Mexico and Germany present equal political threats to England, such that Marxist-Communism and Fascism articulate different versions of the same underlying principle: “anarchy” (721).

Waugh fashions his object-lesson in anarchy (the American title is *Mexico: An Object Lesson*) after Orwell’s “object-lesson in poverty” (9) in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and his lesson in disenchantment and propaganda in *Homage to Catalonia*. According to Waugh, noise underpins Mexican politics. The “*Grito*, or shout” (901), effectively a speech-act of Mexican independence, combines the amplified voice with masses of people, a form of political racket that Waugh finds loathsome for undermining the critical apparatus that supports the free-thinking individual. In addition to his lamentation over mass politics in the late 1930s, Waugh points to the cultural-political anarchy at the core of the Mexican infrastructure. Considering his polemic against the treatment of Catholic priests—a polemic he shares with Graham Greene’s *The Lawless Roads*, also published in 1939—in Mexico and his commission by the Cowdray family,

Waugh clearly takes his travel writing to the level of political and not just cultural propaganda. Clive Pearson of the wealthy Cowdray family, who founded the Mexican Eagle oil company in 1908, commissioned Waugh for a treatise on the Cardenas regime's nationalization of the oil industry in 1938. The seizures by President Cardenas were met with "the wide approval of British socialists" (Fussell 222), who saw the Cowdrays as "ruthless capitalist exploiters and the Mexican government as a benevolent Marxist institution that had a right to expel its blood-sucking parasites" (Schweizer 57). According to Fussell, Waugh initially called the book "Pickpocket Government," but Pearson wanted something less inflammatory.

Waugh depicts Mexico as a modern "waste land" with a half-dead "lunar" character, and criticizes the anarchy underlying partisan politics and left-wing orthodoxy that led the 1930s: "Politics, everywhere destructive, have here dried up the place, frozen it, cracked it and powdered it to dust. Is civilisation, like a leper, beginning to rot at its extremities?" (720). The metaphor is more than convenient; it implies that the extremities threaten the bodily core. Waugh contends that the actions of the current Mexican government to expropriate British oil interests and the bawl of public opinion on the left in support of the move is evidence of a "deliberately fostered anarchy of public relations and private opinions that is rapidly making the world uninhabitable" (721). Anarchy is the deeper cause, one fostered by the Marxist government in Mexico and one Waugh believes is corrupting public opinion at home. The anarchy is not isolated abroad, but fluid, and threatening from Central Europe as much as from Mexico, and at home.

Anarchy manifests itself in noise. Waugh notices that aside from "the

holidaymakers and the sentimentalists,” Mexico, now “of ‘contemporary significance,’” is also drawing a third group of foreign visitors: “These are the ideologues; first in Moscow, then in Barcelona, now in Mexico these credulous pilgrims pursue their quest for the promised land; constantly disappointed, never disillusioned, ever thirsty for the phrases in which they find refreshment” (726). He denigrates these ideologues in religious terms for they treat their political and material journeys as spiritual ones. Waugh’s conservative outlook, one that sees man’s happiness on earth as more or less independent of “political and economic conditions,” is therefore “strengthened” by what he sees in Mexico (729). His bout of self-reflection and admission of partisanship to the reader is not unusual for Waugh in his travel writing—he always feigns the personal—but the accompanying warning to the reader (“Let me, then, warn the reader that I was a Conservative when I went to Mexico and that everything I saw there strengthened my opinions” [729]) is also testament to the changing political and rhetorical landscape of reportage in the late 1930s. Orwell uses the straight-shooting rhetoric of the honest debunker of myths and propaganda in *Homage in Catalonia*; Waugh is fashioning himself in similar terms. Schweizer comments on this as being a “prelude to” and not a disclaimer of propaganda (Schweizer 55). Like Orwell, Waugh distinguishes his voice from anarchy, corrupt politics, and noise. He presents himself as the lone voice in the wilderness, a kind of evangelical politics. Waugh critiques what he considers political infidelity, which spreads in noise.

Mexico City is a vortex of noise and anarchy, a “huge, crowded, cosmopolitan, infernally noisy place where everything contrives to puzzle and stun the stranger, so that in the first days of his visit he lives in a kind of breathless trance” (732). Waugh presents

it as the anarchic city par excellence, where the soundscape is unrelentingly noisy. The aural culture is simply shattering; excessive, unwanted sound negates thought and serves as a playground for anarchy. In short, Waugh writes, "Mexico is the most shrill and thunderous city in the world. Noise is the first, shattering greeting to the stranger, it is the constant companion of all his days, the abiding memory which he takes home with him to the nordic stillness of London or New York. Noise of every conceivable kind competing for predominance" (733-34). Waugh catalogues the various types of noise that he encounters, from the "traffic" to a variety of loud "human voices" (734). Only the beggars seem quiet. He bemoans what he calls "the abstract noise for noise's sake," where individuals make noise for no other good reason than to make noise: "for Mexicans feast on sound, as the more ascetic nordics fast on stillness, and count no man happy until his ear drums are ringing" (734-35). Mexicans court noise, and thus meaninglessness, for its own sake. Waugh takes the distinction between quiet and noise, European and Mexican, and exaggerates it through the juxtaposition of incongruities.

The Opera House is a central institution in the iconography of European culture. Waugh juxtaposes it with the "mechanical pile-driver": the one represents the refinement of noise into the most delicate and forceful interplay of music and silence; the other literalizes power as noise and repetition, a symbol of industry and expanse.

But of all the noises of Mexico City the loudest and most individual was made by the mechanical pile-driver opposite the Opera House. Thud-shriek, thud-shriek; it worked day and night; the hammer fell, the compressed air escaped and the great tree trunks sank foot by foot into the soft sub-soil. While, in the general slump, other major works were at a

standstill, this infernal machine pounded on incessantly, dominating a whole quarter of the city. By a peculiar irony it was constructing new vaults for the metallic reserves of the National Bank. The national finances that summer were a joke which was offensive to nobody. Revenue was down, production was down, credit was down, trade was down; the pile-driver seemed to thump home monotonously the simple facts of national bankruptcy. (735)

Noise becomes the audible sign of wastefulness, one that goes unnoticed except by the foreigner. While Waugh's fictional characters are often ridiculed for their inability to hear undue noise, there is little comedy in the noise of the pile-driver. Noise and aimless economy go together in Mexico City. The pile-driver symbolizes labour at the expense of a sound economy and a thriving artistic culture, which are silent and inept in lieu of the blind work. The "infernal machine" provides the audible echo of the Mexican government's crisis-ridden administration, and its position opposite the Opera House further evinces the cultural confusion of anarchy. As Michael Ross points out, *Punch* printed cartoons in the late 1920s and early 1930s that depicted Africans applauding city works in London using jackhammers as a kind of musical display (64). In the second panel, back in Africa, the workmen perform for an audience with an entire musical ensemble. To unrefined sensibilities, music and mechanical noise are indistinguishable. Waugh is not drawing such a caricature, but he does imply a similar lack of cultural and economic soundness of thought.

To Waugh, the rampant anarchy in Mexico echoes the rising wave of fascism in Europe, particularly Nazi Germany. Comparing the expropriation of the oil industry in

Mexico with the horrifying lawlessness of “the new, Nazi statecraft” (801) is a gross misjudgment, but every feature, Waugh argues, of the Cardenas administration, with the exception of “the catch-phrases,” is an “echo of Central Europe. Government is by a semi-military executive which overrides judicature and legislature; popular consent is achieved by agitation; education is a department of propaganda, religion banned from the schools and its place taken by nationalism and national grievances; the basic assumption of foreign policy is that the democracies will not fight; force may be used to steal what force will not defend” (801). Waugh isolates what he considers the tell-tale signs of a dangerous government, reiterated here in terms of the echo that shows the fascism of Nazi Germany in cahoots with the Marxist-communism of Cardenas’s Mexico. After George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, this kind of government became the hallmark of totalitarianism—“The expropriations were first proposed as a means of raising social conditions; they are now an excuse for depressing them” (801)—one Waugh is parading for criticism a decade earlier.

Technology facilitates the spread of anarchy and encourages group or “mass” ideologies rather than the idealized individual—rational, free-thinking, cultured—engagement with political democracy. The Crisis of September 1938, in which Germany’s designs for the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia were made explicit, draws headlines in Mexico predicting the worst for Europe—“*Guerra Inevitable* on all the posters” (748). In Waugh’s view, the rhetoric of crisis overstepped its mark when it is suggested that children were being evacuated and Londoners “were digging trenches in Hyde Park” (748). “A little later,” he notes, “thousands of people in the United States were thrown into panic by the belief that there had been an invasion from Mars; that is



how the September crisis looked in Mexico for the first few days. People with wireless sets said they had heard snatches from London; things looked very bad there” (748).<sup>8</sup> Technology and the media court crisis. The broadcast effect of alarm spreads only panic, not correct information. By means of including these two moments in succession, Waugh implies that they both exemplify misunderstanding, a miscomprehension by the mass media.

For Waugh, anarchy and misguided public opinion are the greatest threats to cultural stability in England. As the conservative impulse wanes, noise pitches higher and higher. Implicitly, the church curbs anarchy and muffles noise. Moreover, the Church exemplifies a socialism that does not breed the kind of anarchic principles that he deplors. The Cathedral in Mexico City provides him with “the most impressive sight in Mexico,” for at all times there was “the same atmosphere of hushed veneration; there were workmen high overhead on scaffolding, hammering at the roof, but it made no difference. It was the one place in Mexico that never seemed noisy. People of every conceivable kind were always there, praying” (884). The church is the only true socialist space in Waugh’s view. It not only accepts all classes but marshals them into an ordered and hierarchical space in which even the sounds of construction—those pointless noises that plague Mexico—serve a non-disruptive purpose. By suggesting that it is the “one place in Mexico that never seemed noisy,” Waugh represents the Church as a space free from native and imported instability. In keeping with Waugh’s penchant for unveiling falsity through juxtaposition and irony, the Church becomes a foil to the perception that Mexico embodies the progressive ideas of Marxism-socialism.

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<sup>8</sup> Waugh is referring to Orson Welles’s broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* (30 October 1938).

Because conservative opinion and the church are not welcomed in Mexico, Waugh suggests, noise dominates. Graham Greene states in *The Lawless Roads* (1939) that “Mexico is a state of mind” (224). Waugh agrees, and warns his English readers that “crowd-patriotism” (906) and the facilitations of the mass media unchecked by conservative opinion foster anarchy, an “orgy” of the mind (917).<sup>9</sup> The transition from the current system in Mexico, Waugh argues, “to that of Germany is a matter of symbols and of discipline” (904). Without the positive work of the conservative, noise spreads unchecked. “Civilisation has no force of its own beyond what is given it from within,” Waugh contends, and it is under constant threat, everywhere, from anarchy: “If it falls we shall see not merely the dissolution of a few joint-stock corporations, but of the spiritual and material achievements of our history. There is nothing, except ourselves, to stop our own countries becoming like Mexico. That is the moral, for us, of her decay” (917). In a climate of liberal democratic opinion tinged with the ideals of European socialism, Waugh suggests, the conservative is the true dissident capable of and responsible for detecting “hypocrisies and inconsistencies” and, worse still, immediate threats (917).

The conservative at home and the conservative abroad serve different functions. *Waugh in Abyssinia* expresses as much, where the proverbial road marks meaningless modernity here and benevolent civilization there. Both Waugh and Orwell criticize the loss of cultural permanence in the 1930s and lament the advance of anarchy in the form

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<sup>9</sup> Waugh complains of left-wing hypocrisy: “Heaven knows, one cannot talk of sympathy being wasted, but sometimes when I find my newspapers day after day full of appeals, handsomely supported and eloquently canvassed, for the victims of totalitarian rule in Central Europe; when I read letters from English socialists, half of whose time is devoted to denying the rights of private property for their fellow countrymen, savagely denouncing Nazi confiscations of Jewish shops and factories; I think of my friends in Mexico who also have been ruined and outlawed, and have received nothing from the democratic peoples except smug suggestions that they and their ancestors have brought things on themselves” (847-48).

of streamlined civilization and mass, political ideologies. Both employ auditory dissidence—listening through the racket to the underlying truth—as rhetorical emblems in their works. George McCartney suggests that Waugh frequently crossed the “border between savagery and civilization, suggesting the demarcation had become hopelessly smudged in the modern era” (“Introduction” xiii). Waugh turns to the ear, and the political trope of noise, to discern the difference between the two. Whereas *Vile Bodies* and *Black Mischief* treat the crossing of civilization and barbarism with dark humour, Waugh’s travel books document the political turmoil of the 1930s as an unresolved muddle of culture and anarchy.

## Chapter Four: Phoniness and War in *Put Out More Flags*

Evelyn Waugh's two major works of the 1940s, *Put Out More Flags* (1942) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), deal with the Second World War. Neither novel, however, does so directly. Waugh shifts his narrative point of view away from the stark objectivity of the 1930s novels, which provide little depth of character but plenty of irony. Though largely objective and impersonal, the narrator of *Put Out More Flags* interjects rare comments that mark a time after the events of the narrative. Following the initial broadcast of war, the air-raid siren is sounded in false alarm: "The hideous, then unfamiliar shriek of the air-raid sirens sang out over London" (18). The "then unfamiliar" marks the impending recurrence and frequency of the sirens, a shriek that becomes all too familiar. It lends the element of historical certainty that emphasizes the bold but foolish belief that air attacks would not happen in England. *Brideshead Revisited*—in addition to Waugh's unfinished *Work Suspended*—is narrated in the first-person. Written at the end of the war, it turns back to the enchantments of the prewar that never were.

In *Put Out More Flags*, Waugh treats the Second World War through its early and uneventful stages, better known as the Phoney War. During the Phoney War, a great deal transpired behind the scenes as a result of the mounting anxiety and uncertainty. There is nothing phoney about war; thus a certain danger lurks in the background of the narrative. Sound approximates the real and punctures the sham surface of things with a mortal reality: the wireless spreads false reports, rumour, and alarm, while bombs and other detonations deliver the reality of the war. Noise bears within it the suggested

sacrifices that will be needed to be victorious—the individual in every sense of the word: Angela's fashionable distance, Basil's endless rackets, Cedric's and Alastair's boyhood fantasies of heroism.

Waugh locates the humour and the trauma of the phoney in noise—unintelligible language, false alarms, wireless broadcasts—but something unutterably real also presses through in blasts, bullets, and noise of war. Mishearing and misunderstanding are staples of humour. Characters in *Put Out More Flags* misunderstand the severity of being at war, which speaks to the state of unpreparedness among the British populace. Noise assumes its most critical function as a sign of both satirical joust and impending trauma; the noise of war is real. The wireless and wireless telegraph are technologies that facilitate the transmission of the phoney as news, false stories as scoops (landing the actual story is accidental), and news broadcasts as propaganda, as assaults against the mind. False alarms and declarations of war over the wireless lend it an air of unreality. On the air, the war is experienced as phoney. When everything is bogus, where does one locate the real and find one's footing?

George McCartney summarizes that "Bogus was Waugh's word for all that had gone hollow in contemporary experience" ("Helena" 64). Phoniness, bogusness, and hypocrisy are constant targets of Waugh's comedy and satire in the 1930s and 1940s. In *Scoop*, Waugh's late 1930s novel about journalists, the mass media is presented as responsible not only for reporting the news, but creating it as well. Waugh satirizes news agencies as entirely inept; much as he does the custodians of culture in his earlier books, Waugh spoofs those who have the power to direct opinions and political futures but lack the ability to do so. Lord Copper, press baron and buffoon, bears the brunt of Waugh's

ridicule. Moreover, Waugh depicts not only reporters and their stories as fabrications and misunderstandings, but the language in which journalists operate—journalese and cablese—is entirely nonsensical and conveys little information of value. Language is an important element to Waugh's critique of contemporary culture and media, but also to the comedy. When Waugh was working as a war correspondent for the *Daily Mail* in Abyssinia during the Italian invasion in 1935, he sent his "scoop" in Latin so as to avoid detection. His dispatch was received as a joke by his editors, and ignored.

Mishearing, or misunderstanding, is essential to Waugh's parody of phoniness. In *Put Out More Flags*, the declaration of war institutes the period of inaction, one defined more by anticipation and reflection than by actual combat. The air-raid siren that follows is a false alarm, but its effects are nonetheless real to some listeners. Waugh's point is that the war begins on a false note, and everyone proceeds accordingly. Few suspect invasion by air, when in fact, by 1942, London had undergone massive aerial bombardment, and the war on foreign soils did not look easily winnable. In *Scoop*, messages are cabled back and forth in a nearly unintelligible form of English. Everything within the novel appears tinged with irony, doubleness, and uncertainty. The phoniness of a debased cultural idiom and a bogus mass media recalls the criticisms levied by T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and George Orwell in the 1930s. All three put stock in the notion that the decline of cultural standards was due in part to debased language use in the mass media, politics, and emergent language systems.

Language usage and style were always on Evelyn Waugh's mind. Though he figures *Brideshead Revisited* retrospectively in terms of decadence and obesity, his introduction to the revised edition indicates that the bleak period of the war during

which it was written (December 1943 to June 1944) and “threatening disaster—the period of soya beans and Basic English” prompted him to infuse its prose with a “kind of gluttony” for “the splendours of the recent past, and for rhetorical and ornamental language, which now with a full stomach I find distasteful. I have modified the grosser passages but have not obliterated them because they are an essential part of the book” (7). Language is inextricably linked to cultural pleasure. Waugh’s comments echo Leavis’s assertion that “fine living depends” upon “the changing idiom,” and that “distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent” when the “use of such a language” is compromised (MCMC 5). Mishearing figured through the pervasiveness of noise and unintelligible language bears with it political consequences, and *Put Out More Flags* satirically draws this somber note up from beneath its comedic surface.

The wireless plays a distinctly disturbing role in Waugh’s two war novels of the 1940s. Devoid of the liberating effects demonstrated in Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*, the wireless unsettles consciousness in *Put Out More Flags* rather than provides relief. Aside from the opening report of Chamberlain’s declaration, the wireless appears to upset and alarm, especially Angela Lyne. *Put Out More Flags* echoes the conclusion of *Vile Bodies* and its wireless declaration of war. Likewise, the wireless set in the opening section of *Brideshead Revisited* is an amplified irritant to the narrator, Charles Ryder. The wireless represents men and a new era that runs counter to the world of the past symbolized by Brideshead. Hooper and Rex Mottram, both loathsome to Ryder, are associated with the wireless. Though the radio conveys something unspeakably real about the war—it causes anxiety, disturbance, fear—there remains something disingenuous about it, something unreal.

Waugh might not have thought that he had a good ear, but his narratives display an acute critical listening. Though the London blitz is not represented directly in *Put Out More Flags* or in *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh is noted for his comment on the second round of the blitz in June 1944, complaining about the “‘inconvenience’ of being awake in the darkness” while he waited “‘for the sounds of the planes which are indistinguishable to an ear like mine from the noise of a motor car’” (qtd. in Jordan 91). While others comment on the “unmistakable noise of bombings” (Jordan 91) and the distinctiveness of their anxiety, Waugh downplays his fears as nuisance. In a sense, he does what he satirizes his characters for doing: not taking the war seriously. As Claire Hopley suggests, *Put Out More Flags* “combines the absurdist energy of the early work with some of the contemplativeness typical of the later novels” (Hopley 84). Waugh’s satire turns coat throughout the narrative, treating roughly characters and institutions handled sympathetically otherwise, demanding of the reader “contempt for the self-centred meanness or silliness that is unaffected by, even unaware of, the seriousness of the war” (Hopley 86).

### The Bogus

Waugh’s criticism of journalism in *Remote People* (“criticism only becomes useful when it can show people where their own principles are in conflict”) accepts that “cheaper newspapers should aim at entertainment rather than instruction,” but “in its scramble for precedence the cheap Press is falling short of the very standards of public service it has set itself. Almost any London newspaper, today, would prefer an incomplete, inaccurate, and insignificant report of an event provided it came in time for



an earlier edition than its rivals” (40). Journalists make the news, and many of them are not even remotely qualified. Though Orwell reserved the lion’s share of his scorn in the late 1930s for the “journalists who do the shouting” and who publish false reports (*Homage to Catalonia*), Waugh, having himself benefited from qualification and experiential oversights to work for the *Daily Mail*, levels less his scorn than his satiric wit in this hilarious send-up of the modern media’s *need* to get the scoop. In *Scoop*, Lord Copper is a ridiculous caricature of the modern mass-market press baron or media magnate. He isolates himself from the noises of his industry; he secludes himself from the goings-on of news production and can be found instead drawing cows in a kind of pastoral blankness. Everything is keyed down in Copper’s inner office: “The typewriters were of a special kind; their keys made no more sound than the drumming of a bishop’s fingertips on an upholstered priedieu; the telephone buzzers were muffled and purred like warm cats” (41). Even the “little bell of synthetic ivory” (41) does not make a sound, but rather lights a lamp in his office.

Bogus news in a bogus idiom threatens the stability of culture. Waugh ridicules the noise inherent to debased language use in the 1930s and 1940s, as indications of cultural decline. Leavis specifies that in the keeping of the minority “is the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. By ‘culture’ I mean the use of such a language” (5).

Simplifying language is debasement. Waugh criticizes Basic English and “cablese”—the condensed and truncated forms used by journalists who communicated their messages by means of the telegram and wireless cable. Throughout his work he is critical of other forms of desultory language use that approximate cultural decline: pointless dialogue,

political and social chatter. In *Vile Bodies*, for example, following the car race, Adam wires his fiancé Nina that their marriage, on again off again, is back on again: “*Drunk Major in refreshment tent not bogus thirty-five thousand married to-morrow everything perfect Agatha lost love Adam*” (175). Adam thinks the message is perfectly clear, but without prior knowledge of the context for each item and some sense of where the breaks and pauses come, it verges on the unintelligible. Journalism becomes the principal subject of criticism because it demands the use of these debased language systems and telegraphic English or cablese.

When social and political forms of rational discourse are ridiculed so relentlessly in Waugh's novels, one is left with the impression that the public sphere is imbued with noise and little else. His indictment of the media in *Scoop* points to the racket of the mass market media outlet. Lord Copper looks to Ishmaelia as a “very promising little war. A microcosm, as you might say, of world drama” (13). Explaining the foreign policy of the paper, Lord Copper contends that “*The Beast* stands for strong mutually antagonistic governments everywhere,’ he said. ‘Self-sufficiency at home, self-assertion abroad’” (14). Rather than report the drama on the other side of the equator, the newspaper magnate encourages the news. The war, of course, has to unfold in certain dimensions to fit the newspaper's policy: “The British public has no interest in a war which drags on indecisively. A few sharp victories, some conspicuous acts of personal bravery on the Patriot side and a colourful entry into the capital. That is *The Beast* Policy for the war” (42).

Competition for news is the prime mover of the news. As William Boot learns the ropes of the industry, having only previously written his *Lush Places* column in relative

seclusion and without much sense of competition and urgency, he is told that unless a story is put into print the same day that it is gathered, “the news would become stale. People would have heard it on the wireless, I mean” (29). *Scoop* amplifies this principle: “If someone else has sent a story before us, our story isn’t news” (66). Competition between media pits the newspaper against the wireless, and paves the way for less-than-genuine story reporting. Some of the best “eye-witness stuff” the paper ever prints comes from a reporter who is not even in country of conflict (32). Wenlock Jakes, a rather famous reporter on salary for one thousand dollars a week, styles himself as the “news centre of the world” (67). Jakes misses his stop in the Balkans and arrives at the wrong station. Nonetheless, he writes of “machine-guns answering the rattle of his typewriter as he wrote,” and he falsifies a story about revolution in the Balkans, “filing a thousand words of blood and thunder a day” in a place relatively quiet and uneventful (67). Because Jakes reports all this, his editors and readers believe him: “they chimed in too. Government stocks dropped, financial panic, state of emergency declared, army mobilized, famine, mutiny and in less than a week there *was* an honest to God revolution under way, just as Jakes had said. There’s the power of the press for you” (67).

The pressure on the press to get the scoop quickly, before rivals do, also places language under an immense strain. Short, clipped packets of information—often coded to keep competitors off the trail of the story—define the mode of communication between reporter and agency and provide considerable humour because they make little sense. The keyword of *Scoop* is given early in the novel as Stitch does her morning crossword puzzle: “detonated” (9). Cablese, journalese, Basic English—the minimized forms of English are necessarily denigrations of the cultural idiom. The lack of integrity

of the debased language systems to convey the news between reporter and news agency requires translation and interpretation, greatly altering the nature of the story in the process. The accuracy of the news is lost in the erasure of subtlety.

*Put Out More Flags* approaches the bogus through the lens of the Phoney War.

The first event of the narrative is Neville Chamberlain's declaration of war on Germany over the wireless, though Waugh does not cite a word from the speech. The subsequent air-raid siren confused some, as it does in the novel, not realizing that the alarm is false. The narrative is generated out of this false note. On the morning of Chamberlain's speech, the narrator intones, "three rich women thought first and mainly of Basil Seal. They were his sister, his mother and his mistress" (9). Barbara's (Basil's sister) reaction approximates one element of the wireless effect; while Freddy calls it "'an evil thing we are fighting,'" Barbara feels as if "the mild, autumnal sky were dark with circling enemy and their shadows were trespassing on sunlit lawns" (9). To Barbara, the broadcast reverberates through the domestic scene. Freddy is getting dressed for war, but he cannot find his gun. He eventually locates it "at the back of the toy cupboard" (10). Freddy's war attire is nothing more than a costume now, a mere prop, no longer a real uniform. As Waugh intimates, the gentleman officers of the First World War are used to the old boy's club of war games, and not to the death en masse of total war that came with the Second. Unpreparedness is a key element throughout the novel, which only makes Waugh's rogue-hero Basil shine more brightly. At the same time, not much changes with the declaration of war.

All three women forecast Basil will profit from the war. Barbara, who bears a "disconcerting resemblance" (14) to Basil, believes that he "'needed a war. He's not meant

for peace” (16). She adds that he has “‘always been a soldier *manqué*” (16). Freddy, on the other hand, believes that “‘If there’d been more like us and fewer like Basil there’d never have been a war. You can’t blame Ribbentrop for thinking us decadent when he saw people like Basil about. I don’t suppose they’ll have much use for him in the army. He’s thirty-six. He might get some sort of job connected with censorship. He seems to know a lot of languages” (16-17). Freddy blames Basil’s playboy-rake personality as the kind of decadence that encouraged the Nazis to squash degeneracy as a threat to Western civilization. Freddy’s hard-line conservative thinking here is not unlike Robert Kelway’s in *The Heat of the Day*.

Lady Seal, Basil’s mother, also believes the war will do him good. Lady Seal “had taken fewer precautions against air raids than most of her friends” (17). She takes an aristocratic, stiff-upper lip perspective on the war, and approves Chamberlain’s speech that morning. Lady Seal is not surprised about entering war again; her husband, Christopher, was too old to fight in the previous war, but he suffered politically in the aftermath. Asked by her servant if she will be taking the necessary precautionary measures against air bombardment, Lady Seal instead steps out onto the balcony and looks up to the sky: “They’ll get more than they bargain for if they try and attack *us*, she thought. High time that man was taught a lesson. He’s made nothing but trouble for years” (19). She turns her thoughts to Ribbentrop and acquaintances who sought to appease him, hoping they feel foolish. The lead up to the war is a kind of family drama. “Lady Seal waited with composure for the bombardment to begin. She had told Anderson it was probably only a practice. That was what one told servants; otherwise they might panic—not Anderson but the maids. But in her heart Lady Seal was sure that

the attack was coming; it would be just like the Germans, always blustering and showing off and pretending to be efficient" (19). The emphasis lies in putting on a front, on appearances, on what one seems to be doing as opposed to what one is really doing. Lady Seal needs to assert composure in the face of fear and alarm. The history of England's moral and military superiority "rang musically in her ears" (19). She is the icon of the British implacability, made ironic by the devastation that was wrought by German bombers. Lady Seal muses over how little she had to give up for the last war, and how Basil, "his peculiarities merged in the manhood of England, at last was entering on his inheritance" (20).

The announcement of war is also registered with Sir Joseph Mainwaring, who "felt ten years younger" and his spirit "inflamed by something nearly akin to religious awe" (21). Mainwaring is a recurring figure of phoniness; he is constantly wrong in his predictions about the going course of the war, suggesting it will be fought like wars in the past, not recognizing the shift that took place in the build up to armed conflict. An "old booby" who feels "in the centre of things again" amidst the "stirring times," he is woefully out of date (21). His thinking is out of tune with current practices; he believes in an "economic war of attrition" that will not involve "any air raids" (21). In short, he thinks there will be a recurrence of the First World War. He cannot conceive of the kinds of warfare, such as air-raids, that make the war more ominous. He is not the only one to hold this belief; Basil Seal expresses the same sentiment to Poppet Green and Ambrose Silk (31), as does a Lieutenant-Colonel (56). While he thinks there might be attempts on the coastline, he recalls a "most interesting talk yesterday to Eddie Beste-Bingham at the Beefsteak; we've got a most valuable invention called R.D.F. That'll keep

'em off" (22). While the rumour may in fact turn out to be true, Mainwaring misunderstands the system. He reiterates the one thing that is "axiomatic. There will be no air attack on London. The Germans will never attempt the Maginot line. The French will hold on for ever, if needs be, and the German air-bases are too far away for them to be able to attack us. If they do, we'll R.D.F. them out of the skies" (22). While there is evidence that many Britons thought that air-raids would never take place, Waugh's position in 1941 makes of this a point of black humour. But that foolishness is not the central target of Waugh's satire, which hones in instead on Mainwaring's obtuseness regarding the real threats that face the island and his ignorance of the country's means to defend itself. The RDF was a detection system (using radio waves, or RADAR) only, which Mainwaring seems to confuse with an anti-aircraft defense system.

Tom Harrisson and Charles Madge provide evidence to corroborate the notion that many did not believe anything really changed with the declaration of war. In fact, one informant claims that the atmosphere "seemed even more unreal; the wireless giving special announcements about air raids and the closing of cinemas, but the sun was still shining, and everything seemed as usual" ("Shadows" 39, 40). Hence, the ensuing sirens both satisfy and disappoint the expectation and the wish for something to happen. Rumour runs rampant after the three false alarms "on September 3, 4 and 6, and it was obviously due to two facts: the culmination of the war of nerves and the lack of official news" (59). The period of the Phoney War is one in which illusory air raids were followed by false propaganda reports from Germany of sunken ships and other offensives, which increased the "general tendency to believe the wildest rumour, or, conversely, to believe nothing at all" (70).

Nancy Mitford's *Pigeon Pie* (1940) represents a similar cat-and-mouse game between disbelief and anxiety. Also set during the Phoney War, *Pigeon Pie* depicts Sophia Garfield in the opening of the novel awaiting and envisioning the devastation triggered by "a loud bang" (1) that is to start the war. Instead of violent noise, however, Sophia thinks Chamberlain "did his best to relieve the tension by letting off air-raid sirens," a "curious practical joke" (2). Like other characters in Second World War novels, Sophia believes Hitler has addressed an "aerial torpedo" directly to her door (28), and later admits to becoming a "raid addict" (52). Sophia's godfather is none other than Sir Ivor King, the "idol of the British race" (21-22), better known as the King of Song, whose adored voice is considered the ideal medium for conveying an "earful of propaganda" (30). In doubly ironic narrative twists, Sir Ivor, like Lord Haw-Haw, broadcasts for the Germans—or so it appears. Everyone seems to believe everything in the novel, and so are drawn into the propaganda and Pets' Programme bellowed over the wireless which are, in fact, intended as a surreptitious signal that the "whole thing was bogus," as he tells Sophia at the conclusion of the novel (184).

*Brideshead Revisited* dramatizes the conflict between silence and sound, culture and noise, in the guise of old and new cultural orders. The world of war stands in direct contrast to the world of Brideshead. Speaking from the present, a time of war, Ryder laments the changes that have brought about the age of Hooper. One of those changes is the ubiquity of the radio. According to Ryder, "the wireless played incessantly in the ante-room nowadays, and much beer was drunk before dinner; it was not as it had been" (11). Ryder's marital metaphor of no longer loving one's wife sheds light on his martial predicament: "I caught the false notes in her voice and learned to listen for them



apprehensively; I recognized the blank, resentful stare of incomprehension in her eyes, and the selfish, hard set of the corners of her mouth" (12). When Ryder hears the name of Brideshead mentioned, "it was as though someone had switched off the wireless, and a voice that had been bawling in my ears, incessantly, fatuously, for days beyond number, had been suddenly cut short; an immense silence followed, empty at first, but gradually, as my outraged sense regained authority, full of a multitude of sweet and natural and long forgotten sounds: for he had spoken a name that was so familiar to me, a conjurer's name of such ancient power, that, at its mere sound, the phantoms of those haunted late years began to take flight" (21). Overlooking the encampment "from which rose the rattle and chatter and whistling and catcalls," Ryder perceives the "zoo-noises of the battalion beginning a new day" (21). Though the wireless set is symbolic of changes that Ryder does not belong to, the radio noise irritates him, but nothing more. In *Put Out More Flags*, the news and propaganda broadcast from France and Germany, in addition to the local reports, are enough to drive Angela Lyne to despair.

Paul K. Saint-Amour refers to the phenomenon of the "routinization of emergency" in which the "disaster that arrives and the disaster that may be about to arrive have equal powers here to engender a 'collective psychosis'; the real war and the rehearsal for war become psychotically indistinct" (Saint-Amour 131). He calls this "future conditional anxiety," such that the memory and fear of aerial bombardment "not only figured prominently in interwar public discourse and the concurrent urban imaginary, but also constituted the locus classicus for a kind of proleptic mass-traumatization, a pre-traumatic stress syndrome whose symptoms arose in response to an anticipated rather than an already realized catastrophe" (131). But, he points out,

anticipation alone is not enough to “traumatize,” but must be mixed with some memory or “past repression or wounding” in order to cause “a traumatizing anticipation that imagines the disaster returning to complete its work. For these reasons, we misconstrue the apocalyptic imagination if we understand it as referring only to the future” (155). Victoria Stewart analyzes the auditory uncanny—what Royle calls “eariness”—of the telephone and its estranging effects in Graham Greene’s *The Ministry of Fear* (1943), particularly “disturbances of perception” (Stewart 69). For Angela, the “future conditional anxiety” is bound up with the effects of the wireless.

The wireless manifests a latent acoustic unconsciousness that precipitates breakdown in *Put Out More Flags*. Angela listens to foreign broadcasts obsessively and becomes radically disoriented; tight with drink, she is destabilized by the radio. Angela listens regularly to the “wireless news from Germany,” spending the rest of her day going to the cinema (120). Restlessness translates into twists of the radio dial: “Tirelessly, all over the world, voices were speaking in their own and in foreign tongues. She listened and fidgeted with the knob; sometimes she got a burst of music, once a prayer. Presently she fetched another whisky and water” (120). She stays in bed and requests that the radio and newspaper be brought to her bedside (121). She is immersed in the news of the war and its propaganda, both foreign and domestic. Her anticipation of disaster is heightened by the initial broadcast of war and ensuing air-raid siren, later amplified by the French and German broadcasts to which she listens obsessively every evening. The wireless radio set follows her around the home as a material equivalent of the pervasiveness of fear and the anticipation of catastrophe during the Phoney War and subsequent blitz. Worsening physically, she gets drunk all day and wears shaded glasses, as an enactment

of her own personal blackout (135).

Basil tries to ring up Angela during her downward spiral, but she will not pick up. She listens to the phone ringing the same way Basil counts out the symbolic grenade he wields in the guise of the Connelly children below: “Angela counted the rings, five, six, seven; then there was silence in the flat; silence except for the radio which said, ‘... dastardly attempt which has shocked the conscience of the civilized world. Messages of sympathy continue to pour into the Chaplain General’s office from the religious leaders of four continents ...’” (151). She switches to German radio, and then to France, both programmes revealing something about the war. Angela can no longer tell the difference between the front lines and the home front, the public and the private, the war and the domestic: she is at risk from all sides. Speaking to herself, she links the “Maginot Line—Angela Lyne—both lines of least resistance” (151). After making a scene outside the cinema and being rescued by Peter Pastmaster and Lady Mary Meadowes who take her home, Angela plops down in the armchair near the radio and soon after her “mind was becoming confused again” (155). Angela’s consciousness is penetrated by the wireless broadcast of the war. In some respects, the Phoney War has more to do with radios and radars and maps than it does troop-to-troop combat. The Maginot Line that was supposed to hold represents a false promise.

Entrenched in and by the war whether she likes it or not, Angela is a representative of its affects. According to Hopley, Angela does not verbalize her knowledge or experience of the war “Because she understands the significance of war, she is alienated, and, in effect, silent” (Hopley 91). She is ventriloquized by the wireless set, by the news of war. For Hopley, Angela’s silence reflects Waugh’s in the novel—

little about the war itself is mentioned in the narrative, unlike other novels of the Second World War—it “is an unspeakable abomination” (93). Ambrose fears misinterpretation while Basil controls meaning; the political schemer is more equipped to deal with the adversity of meaning during wartime. Neutrality, Ambrose’s and Ireland’s, seems unacceptable, though the best choice for posterity. Noise is subjective, but war sounds are real, never phoney and never neutral.

### Brothers in Arms

Ambrose and Basil maintain a “mutually derisive acquaintance” (34) since their days as undergraduates. Ambrose saw himself as a “martyr to Art” at times, neither selling himself to the upper class (in which he grew up) nor “becoming proletarian” (with Parsnip and Pimpernell): “I belong, hopelessly, to the age of the ivory tower” (35). He magnifies the effects of martyrdom by mixing with those who least respect him: “It was his misfortune to be respected as a writer by almost everyone except those with whom he most consorted. Poppet and her friends looked on him as a survival from the Yellow Book” (35). Ambrose once “recited *In Memoriam* through a megaphone to an accompaniment hummed on combs and tissue paper” (43). Disenchanted with everyone and everything, he feels that the war exacerbates his sense of alienation: “Here is the war, offering a new deal for everyone; I alone bear the weight of my singularity” (61). Ambrose, growing weary of all the war talk and everyone he knows joining up, decides that if he were to take part, if he did have a stake in the war, he would personalize combat: “I wouldn’t sit around discussing what kind of war it was going to be. I’d make it my kind of war” (73). Fulfilling this prediction, Ambrose starts a “new magazine to

keep culture alive” (77), responding to war with cultural refinement.

Basil is disinherited, as is Ambrose, so the war provides him with a unique opportunity to get ahead. Basil figures himself as his own state, “conducting his own campaigns, issuing his own ultimatums, disseminating his own propaganda, erecting about himself his own blackout; he was an obstreperous minority of one in a world of otiose civilians. He was used, in his own life, to a system of push, appeasement, agitation, and blackmail, which, except that it had no more distant aim than his own immediate amusement, ran parallel to Nazi diplomacy” (49). In other words, Basil is a kind of mercenary, entirely individual, though his schemes have direct political parallels. In this sense, Ambrose and Basil share many traits, though they are on different ends of the cultural spectrum. There is something to admire about Ambrose Silk’s and Basil Seal’s preservation of the individual and individual preservation during the war, albeit for different ends.

Basil’s work with the Connolly children (Doris, Mickey, and Marlene) presents another example of his resourceful rackets. The Irish children are deployed in terms of war: when they are returned after a night, “It was if though the All Clear had sounded after a night of terror” (83). The children bring the experience of wartime, air-raid London to the country. Basil uses them as one uses a grenade on Mr. and Mrs. Harkness, who expect to make a profit from housing the evacuees of the war. Basil plays along until Mr. Harkness names his price:

The moment for which Basil had been waiting was come. This was the time for the grenade he had been nursing ever since he opened the little, wrought-iron gate and put his hand to the wrought-iron bell-pull. “We

pay eight shillings and sixpence a week," he said. That was the safety pin; the lever flew up, the spring struck home; within the serrated metal shell the primer spat and, invisibly, flame crept up the finger's-length of fuse. Count seven slowly, then throw. One, two, three, four ...

"Eight shillings and sixpence?" said Mr Harkness. "I'm afraid there's been some misunderstanding."

Five, six, *seven*. Here it comes. Bang! "Perhaps I should have told you at once. I am the billeting officer. I've three children for you in the car outside."

It was magnificent. It was war. Basil was something of a specialist in shocks. He could not recall a better. (95)

Basil specializes in the scheme. He embodies phoniness, yet this phoniness is vexed by something serious underneath. Basil is also a cipher for British heroism in the novel, at least to the three women in his life who each see within him salvation and redemption in war. Basil, defined by racket, is fitting heir to the uncertain promise of the air-raid siren. He perpetrates several schemes and rackets that take advantage of the war (fear, suspicion, goodwill). His final racket is killing Germans, and that, despite its school-boyish adventure narrative ring, answers the call of his country.

Waugh ridicules the label "fascist" throughout the novel by always putting it in Poppet's mouth. Poppet again calls Ambrose a "lousy fascist" because he works in the Ministry of Information and brings out a "fascist paper" (173). The point of the novel, with regard to Basil, is that during war, self-interest and national interest coincide. In Ambrose's case, that is not so readily apparent, especially when Basil intervenes.

Regarding ideological conflict, Waugh thinks that the label “fascist” is improperly applied in Britain. As Marina MacKay suggests, “Waugh satirises the polarising effects of the 1930s by suggesting that Ambrose’s tolerant liberalism could become untenable in a culture that, refusing to admit positions between left and right, renders effectively ‘fascist’ anything not explicitly on the left” (MacKay 123). In a letter to the *New Statesman* on 5 March 1938 protesting the sloppy use of the “fascist” label, Waugh contends that there has never been a fascist movement in England and a “highly vocal party” who throw the term about are “busy creating a boggy” (*Essays* 223). Waugh sends up this ideological name-calling in *Scoop* (43).

Phoniness is a popular topic of conversation during the war, though language does not promise any distinction. Ambrose describes the decline of England to Geoffrey Bentley in terms of coal and fog: “We designed a city which was meant to be seen in a fog. We had a foggy habit of life and a rich, obscure, choking literature. The great catch in the throat of English lyric poetry is just *fog*, my dear, on the vocal chords. And out of the fog we could rule the world; we were a Voice, like the Voice of Sinai smiling through the clouds. Primitive peoples always choose a God who speaks from a cloud” (174-75). He suggests, then, that the invention of electricity and oil fuel lifted the fog, and like a “carnival ball” the masks were removed at midnight and the guests are revealed to be “composed entirely of imposters” (175). Basil joins the conversation and mentions how “Half the thinking men in France have begun looking to Germany as their real ally” (175), which was aided by Goebbels propaganda in 1940. But Basil is corrected by the two men that they are talking “of Fogs, not Frogs” (175). The obscurity of the voice amidst the fog is replaced by the imposter’s brow. Moreover, when Basil mishears the

conversation, he in fact interjects with an exacting political comment of his own about the war: the intellectuals in France are beginning to see Germany as an ally in thought, not an enemy.

After this initial exchange, the conversation delves deeper to reveal, in Basil's eyes, that Ambrose is indeed a fascist, or enough of one to move Basil ahead at the Ministry of Information. According to Ambrose, the Chinese scholar believed "the military hero was the lowest of human types, the subject for ribaldry" (176). "Chinese scholarship deals with taste and wisdom, not with the memorizing of facts" (176), something Ezra Pound emphasized in several of his works, including *Guide to Kulchur* (1938). "European culture has become conventual; we must make it cenobitic" (176), Ambrose explains, valuing the individual in isolation as a model for cultural renewal—unquestionably a position that moves against the grain of war effort and the breaking down of walls between people that many blitz novelists describe. But in Ambrose's cultural politics Basil finds his fascist: "These scholars of yours, Ambrose—they didn't care if their empire was invaded?" (177). "Not a hoot, my dear, not a *tinker's* hoot," is Ambrose's reply (177). Basil has his man: "And you're starting a paper to encourage this sort of scholarship" (177). As MacKay specifies, the novel is about opportunism: "Structured by the parallel efforts of the apolitical Ambrose Silk and the viciously political Basil Seal to find niches for themselves in wartime, *Put Out More Flags* describes how creative dissidence is victimised by political expediency masquerading as patriotic duty" (121).

Basil's careful setting of a mousetrap for Ambrose is counterbalanced by his ignoring the real threat that does present itself on the steps of the Ministry of



Information. The detonation of the suitcase-bomb in the Ministry building in the Chaplain General's office punctures the unreality and phoniness of the war with something quite real, the only real blast in London. The echo of the bomb blast can be heard over the phone line. Basil, a master of detonations and bogusness, could have stopped the man earlier, but instead gave him directions to the Chaplain's office. Basil bumps into the man ("lunatic") with a suitcase full of bombs who has been sent from department to department since the war began, no one wishing to deal with or take responsibility (68). Basil goes to War Office and meets the little bomb hawking lunatic, and gets him in; Basil then directs him to the Chaplain General (145). The detonation shakes the whole building (149-50). Like the declaration of war at the outset of the novel, news of the detonation is broadcast over the wireless. By the time it reaches Angela Lyne, her weakened state cannot withstand the news of the detonation.

The bomb that kills Cedric Lyne also punctures the phoney with something real. The key signature of the Phoney War is the false alarm; the point, as I read it, is that one must know when the danger is real, a discernment Waugh suggests is not so readily available. Cedric perceives of the sound of the bomb as unreal, overcome as he is by silliness the moment before impact. "He," MacKay points out, "like Ambrose, is entirely wrong to believe that 'No one had anything against the individual'; trusting in his solitary safety, he is killed in action as surely as Ambrose is outlawed for his defence of ivory tower privacy" (133). While perhaps not a mirage, the ivory tower is a misleading metaphor for the condition under which writers worked as it was virtually impossible for them to be without contacts with the political establishment of one kind or another.

When the narrative finally does move to the battlefield, it unfolds without any

real danger at all. Cedric is watching the action through a set of binoculars, “the aeroplanes manoeuvred in the sharp sunlight” like “horses in a riding school” (204).

Insulated by his class and ill-fitting notions of the war, Cedric becomes the ideal target in the war precisely because he believes the individual is—both as concept and as existential being—not worth the ammunition. Again, a kind of pastoral-domestic image is used to portray the military. “The engines sang in the morning sky, the little black bombs tumbled out, turning over in the air, drifting behind the machines, breaking in silent upheavals of rock and dust which were already subsiding when the sound of the explosions shook the hillside where Cedric Lyne sat with his binoculars, trying to mark their fall” (204-05). Although delayed, the sounds of the explosions do arrive. The reconnaissance plane overhead does not cause Cedric to take cover or even to alter his pace:

The great weapons of modern war did not count in single lives; it took a whole section to make a target worth a burst of machine-gun fire; a platoon or a motor lorry to be worth a bomb. No one had anything against the individual; as long as he was alone he was free and safe; there’s danger in numbers; divided we stand, united we fall, thought Cedric, striding happily towards the enemy, shaking from his boots all the frustration of corporate life. He did not know it, but he was thinking exactly what Ambrose had thought when he announced that culture must cease to be conventual and become cenobitic. (208)

Cedric lauds the freedom and safety of the individual even during wartime. Cedric set out across the battlefield (in order to aid the withdrawal of the front line of troops), and “All

seemed quite unreal to him still" (210). "The bombers were not aiming at any particular target," and the "noise was incessant and shattering. Still it did not seem real to Cedric. It was part of a crazy world where he was an interloper. It was nothing to do with him. A bomb came whistling down, it seemed from directly over his head. He fell on his face and it burst fifty yards away, bruising him with a shower of small stones" (210). Cedric is being watched by both sides, and though "out of effective rifle range" from the enemy, "spent bullets were singing round him among the rocks" (211), a testimony to the fact that the individual is worth killing. The Colonel marks his impending doom: "I suppose, thought Cedric, I'm being rather brave. How very peculiar. I'm not the least brave, really; it's simply that the whole thing is so damned silly" (211). Cedric never reaches them. The phoney is replaced by unnecessary sacrifice. This unnecessary sacrifice betokens the cost of being unprepared, and the irrepressible real that underlies the phoniness of war. Cedric cannot accept the reality of the war, of his impending death on the battlefield in an unglorious way.

The Epilogue raises the "swift sequence of historic events" that brought the Second World War into top gear (212). While most were distraught, Joseph Mainwaring is vainly patriotic despite the immense losses suffered at the hands of the Germans: "Germany set out to destroy our army and failed; we have demonstrated our invincibility to the world" (213). Mainwaring concludes that "The war had entered into a new and more glorious phase" (213). The narrator offers the following retort: "And in this last statement, perhaps for the first time in his long and loquacious life, Sir Joseph approximated to reality; he had said a mouthful" (213). The narrator means two things. First, Mainwaring is consistently wrong about the war. He does not understand that the

nature of warfare and the times have changed dramatically from what they were even in the First World War. Instead of phoniness, he says something that approximates truth. Second, the narrator is ironic about the statement that the war has entered a new and glorious phase. Indeed, in terms of the killing and the losses and advances, and the utter cost of it all, there is something astoundingly real in the phrase. But Angela is given the most resolute statement on the war. Receiving the news of Cedric's death by telegram, Basil and Angela discover how difficult it will be to think ahead. They contemplate marriage now that Cedric is gone: "But you see one can't expect anything to be perfect now. In the old days if there was one thing wrong it spoiled everything; from now on for all our lives, if there's one thing right the day is made" (218). Whatever changes have been brought about by war, nothing essential changes in the lives of characters.

Ambrose, on the far shores of Ireland, cultivates the aesthetics of silence. For Ambrose, the fall of France carries with it no echo; he is removed, with the neutral Irish, from the world of heroes, action, and death: "In a soft, green valley where a stream ran through close-cropped, spongy pasture and the grass grew down below the stream's edge and merged there with the water-weeds; where a road ran between grass verges and tumbled walls, and the grass merged into moss which spread upwards and over the tumbled stone walls, outwards over the pocked metalling and deep ruts of the road; where the ruins of a police barracks, built to command the road through the valley, burnt in the troubles, had once been white, then black, and now were on green with the grass and the moss and the water-weed" (202-03). In neutral Ireland, even political history has been overgrown. Though Ambrose is given the Order of Merit in Waugh's last short story, "Basil Seal Rides Again," for championing silence (*Stories* 504), it is clear at the

conclusion of *Put Out More Flags* that the neutral is unproductive and not even beneficial for one's art: "The days passed and he did absolutely nothing. The fall of France had no audible echo on that remote shore" (218). Waugh adds "remote" to indicate the distance is not just geographical, but political as well. War is, in the end, uncreative.

As Peter Mudford points out, Mainwaring's final comments bring the novel with its ironic title to its "smashing conclusion": "This new spirit led first to the 'Churchillian renaissance', but it also led in 1945 to the Labour Party's landslide victory. The Britain which had been bombed needed to be rebuilt in a new way. The time had come for change" (Mudford 189-90). Although he is a "poor booby," Mainwaring is nonetheless "bang right" (*POMF* 222). The novel circles back to Waugh in 1930, author of *Vile Bodies* but also author of the travelogue *Labels*. At the conclusion of that book, a boatload of passengers is disconcerted by the news that comes over the wireless of early returns on the General Election, in which the Conservatives conceded considerable power to the Labour Party. In a way, Waugh brings the two conclusions together in *Put Out More Flags*.

*Brideshead Revisited* also marks the threshold between two different worlds. As Mudford suggests, "Rex Mottram and his friends are having a good war, increasing their power within the new society the war was creating" (Mudford 192). When war comes, Rex takes the microphone to make broadcasts denouncing Hitler, amplifying his already loud voice to make Hitler, according to Nanny Hawkins, feel that much smaller. Rex is the opposite of Ryder, or at least that is the impression Ryder wishes to leave. Ryder's sensitivity as an acute listener is essential to his narration and directly contrasts with the political bombast associated with Rex and his kind. In *Scoop*, *Put Out More Flags*, and *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh tests the relation between phoniness and technology, whether

the printing press or the wireless. Rex's voice in *Brideshead Revisited* sounds like the barking of a radio commentator because he understands that technology, in its dissemination of words and noise, has political implications. Those implications are not always truthful, but they have, nonetheless, consequences for all those who listen.

## Chapter Five: Documenting Noise: George Orwell in the 1930s

“There are evil neighborhoods of noise and evil neighborhoods of silence ...”

– T. S. Eliot, *Eldrop and Appleplex*

In George Orwell's works, noise implies a struggle for power. From *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Orwell interrogates the politics of noise in relation to class, language, technology, propaganda, and war. Listening, in addition to reading and writing, becomes a political act for Orwell during the 1930s and 1940s; it is also a social act inflected by Orwell's commitment to decency. This chapter examines Orwell's thinking about the relationship between noise and class, noise and culture, and noise and war. Orwell conceives of noise in terms of documentary and fictional representation, as something either experienced or imagined. Sometimes noise has semantic content and sometimes it is merely incomprehensible brouhaha. Crowds generate noise, but no specific meaning attaches to that sound. The instances of noise in Orwell's novels and reportage have rhetorical purpose and political repercussion. He includes noise in order to dramatize the problems of civilization and culture in the 1930s, particularly as it relates to the working classes and the boundaries of Empire. Noise also signifies violent conflict in the Spanish Civil War and the impending outbreak of the Second World War.

Orwell's evolving political conscience makes him initially identify noise with impoverished classes, in the street clamour of *Down and Out in Paris and London* or the unbearable din of mining in *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). As he thinks more about politics, however, he breaks the identification of class with noise. Instead of clamorous riots, as in *Burmese Days* (1934), Orwell imagines that noise has effects on all classes, as when lower middle-class George Bowling in *Coming Up for Air* (1939) seeks refuge from

relentless urban racket of the London suburb, or when Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is subjected to screeching telescreens; noise and propaganda barrage him daily.

While noise can offer hope for change, it can, according to Orwell, also promise disillusionment—and worse. The initial “uproar” (14) in *Animal Farm* (1945) signals revolution afoot; the concluding “uproar” in the farmhouse signifies its utter betrayal.

In a speech at Harvard University in September 1943, Sir Winston Churchill described the lead up to the Second World War—the Spanish Civil War and Nazi encroachments in Europe in the 1930s—as “battles for the Empires of the mind” (qtd. in West, *The War Commentaries*, 11). As many critics have pointed out, Orwell’s experiences as an officer of the British Empire, his travels “down” to the impoverished classes, his engagement in the Spanish Civil War, and his wartime broadcasts for the BBC Eastern Service contribute to his deepening sense of the contradictory nature of these battles. While doubtful that violence is humane, he realizes that victory in war is crucial to survival. War is the struggle for power in its loudest form, as represented in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Yet the struggle for power can also be subdued, taking on more subtle forms that speak to inherent racial and class divisions that preoccupy much of Orwell’s writing in the 1930s. The political ends of noise in Orwell’s work reveal a totalitarian state that will stop at nothing to obliterate independent thought from the rational mind. When orthodoxy becomes unconscious behaviour, all thoughts not generated by the dominant ideology are perceived as disruptive noise, which must be eliminated. The sheer terror of Winston’s plight in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* represents the maniacal ends to which Big Brother and O’Brien will go, as Richard Rorty has argued, to secure his confession and, ultimately, control his mind.



Listening becomes as political an act as it is an entertaining one in the 1930s. Orwell listens intently in his documentary realism, most notably in *Homage to Catalonia* where a plethora of sounds and noises vie for dominance. Discerning the difference between this sound and that noise is synonymous with, by the end of the book, discerning truth from lies; semantic meaning is not far removed from its political and moral counterpart. Orwell layers semantic and inferential meaning in noise as a way of deepening his interpretation of conflict and drawing attention to his position at the centre of things, capable of hearing the pulsation at the heart of the matter. Some noises are rendered by means of onomatopoeia and phonetic intensives. In this respect, the documentary writer is fashioning the rhetorical “I” as a recording device, leaving some noises untranslated for vocative authenticity. These gestures are both literary and intended to be complementary; but so too are they political, and not so easily reconciled.

Throughout his writing, Orwell adopts what Richard Rorty calls the “rhetoric of transparency” (174). Pitched as an antidote to modern conflict and dishonest politics, Orwell’s reputation as a plain-speaking, clear-writing critic of false idols and ideologies is itself a source of contention amongst critics. Kristin Bluemel contends that the “myth of Orwell as ‘the last man in Europe’ partakes of and contributes to all of the dominant four myth-types Rodden identifies with Orwell’s reputation: the rebel, the common man, the prophet, and the saint” (Bluemel 137). No summary could do justice to the vast field of Orwell criticism, especially the amount generated by the widely popular *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (for which collections continue to be gathered). Orwell is renowned for his commitment to decency, his intellectual honesty and plain-spoken style (Bluemel, Dentith, Stewart, Rorty, Raymond Williams, Rodden, Meyers, Ross,

McLaughlin, Hitchens, Ingle, Filloy), his concerns with the working-classes (Breton, Campbell, Sabin, Raymond Williams, Eagleton, Patai, Hoggart, Ingle), and his relentless critique of propaganda and totalitarianism. Many scholars have praised these qualities in Orwell's work; as many have found these traits lacking when, they argue, it matters most. Issues of literary form and culture (Rae, Keith Williams, Marks, Gottlieb) in the 1930s and Orwell's work as a broadcaster with the BBC during the war (Kerr, Bluemel, Ingle) remain other important, though certainly less-studied elements of his work. The strikes against Orwell remain his views, or lack of a clear viewpoint, on the racial "other" (Kerr, Bluemel, Rae, Stewart), women (Campbell, Patai, Templin), and the holocaust (Newsinger, Bluemel).

Scholars have not yet dealt with sound or noise in Orwell's work. Several critics have pointed to Orwell's thematic preoccupation and demonization of the gramophone as a metaphor of instrumental social and political conformity (Fowler, Rae, Slater, Stewart). The technology of the telescreen and the crude grammar of Newspeak have generated an immense critical discussion on the nature of propaganda, panoptic surveillance, and the military-industrial state, from a range of disciplines within the humanities; but the concept of noise remains peripheral.

Noise reorients our understanding of these key concepts and issues in Orwell's work. At first glance, decency and noise seem contrary to one another; the one having to do with appropriateness and fitness of case, the other with excess and unwanted. Noise overwhelms the individual plea. Anthony Stewart defines decency as "an expression of the desire that human beings be treated 'appropriately' as fitting 'the case,' that is, as befitting their humanity" (Stewart 3). Yet noise, as a sign of social discontent and

suffering, also demands decency. Many critics point to the inconsistencies—Breton catalogues them (154)—in Orwell’s treatment and theorization of the working classes in his writing. Orwell associates noise and its absence distinctly with working-class cultures in the 1930s, as he does racial and gendered inflections in *Burmese Days*, but imbricates all classes in noise in the 1940s. Orwell’s relentless denunciation of noise in language—both as faulty expression and as propaganda—has its own resonance of “totalitarian violence, even a kind of eugenicist enthusiasm” (Bhabha 180). I analyze noise and language in Orwell’s work alongside his evolving political critique of orthodoxy and totalitarianism, as well as the modernist tradition from which it derives. Bluemel orients her study of intermodernism around Orwell and considers his a “non-modernist presence” (Bluemel 138). By focusing on noise across Orwell’s works, I offer a reading that situates his work as both modernist and non-modernist: reorienting modernist concerns toward the political in a decidedly different way.

### **Clamour in *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier***

Orwell’s three works of reportage—*Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and *Homage to Catalonia*—integrate and interrogate noise as a sign of authenticity. Sights, smells, and sounds contribute to the empirical validity of the first-hand witness account; the documentary writer enhances his rhetorical position by appealing to details. Simon Dentith brings to mind Orwell’s discussion of excrement in *Homage to Catalonia* as a “mark of authenticity” that contributes to the author’s rhetorical stance: “if Orwell is prepared to mention *that*, we are invited to think, then there is nothing that is being omitted” (Dentith 218). Blending documentary with personal

record, reportage as a non-fiction form of literature in the 1930s and 1940s had to compete with the dominance of film and radio for providing evidence of sensory experience. Phenomenal noises lie beyond the written word; the literary text can record and represent sounds, but not with the same register of fidelity as can a gramophone record or auditory soundtrack, and not with the same immediacy as the wireless broadcast. This inadequacy, however, lends rhetorical force to the documentarian's mediation of reality through description. The inability to "get it all down," as it were, invites the reader not only to experience "on behalf of," but also to understand by proxy. Orwell's rhetorical stance in *Down and Out in Paris in London*, according to Dentith, is "of the man who is prepared to face and come to terms with the worst," while in *Homage to Catalonia* it is "the plain man, with his own biases duly allowed for, trying to make sense of the events that happen across his path" (218, 217).

In his travel writing, Orwell gives voice to different cultures and classes of people. *Down and Out in Paris and London* renders the discourse of foreigners, tramps, and the working classes in quotation, as if actually recorded by the implied author. In *The Road to Wigan Pier* direct discourse is elided by paraphrase, save the short quotation for rhetorical effect. Largely absent in this work of social conscience that documents the ills of a failing economic system and the problems riddling the working classes are the sounds of complaint that one would expect to hear. Working-class complaint is evidenced early on in the case of the Brookers, particularly Mrs. Brooker's "self-pitying talk—always the same complaints, over and over, and always ending with the tremulous whine of 'It does seem 'ard, don't it now?'" (14). Such complaint, however, is often paraphrased; the narrator ventriloquizes the working-class voice or views the working

classes objectively. Orwell, speeding by on a train, sees a woman unclogging a drain-pipe in the cold. The woman wore “the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen,” he explains: “She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe” (15). The narrator, as if providing a voice-over for the filmic scene (Orwell reworked the scene laboriously from his diary), asserts her destiny and implies that the woman shares his view. As Douglas Kerr retorts, she hardly needs a “passing bourgeois sentimentalist to make her aware of her misery” (Kerr 240). Moreover, while Orwell describes the incredible noises that come with mining, other noises of working-class life are not as present in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as they are in *Down and Out in Paris and London*; there are no shouting matches, no bustling marketplaces, no raucous scenes in pubs. The noise of argument and discontent is relocated to the second half of the book, where the voice is singularly Orwell’s, the argument solely with English socialism in the 1930s.

In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the sounds of poverty are blended with personal opinion as Orwell examines the assumptions and mores that dominate the social order from the bottom up. Orwell presents the experiences of poverty through the senses, especially hearing. The book opens by describing what readers are expected to understand as a representative morning in the Paris slums. Out of this hullabaloo emerges the voice of the narrator, the retrospective eye-witness reporter. Both a part of and distinct from the “scene,” he is able to ascribe meaning because of his first-hand authority. The tone of the opening sentence is flat and matter of fact: “The Rue du Coq d’Or, Paris, seven in the morning. A succession of furious, choking yells from the street”

(5). The landlady, Madam Monce, quarrels openly with a third-floor lodger. The narrator quotes the main combatants in dramatic form, until “a whole variegated chorus of yells” sounded as “half the street joined in the quarrel” (5). “I sketch this scene,” he explains, “to convey something of the spirit of the Rue du Coq d’Or,” which is filled with “desolate cries,” “shouts,” and “loud singing” (5). The houses, “frozen in the act of collapse” (5), are filled with a heterogeneous glut of lodgers who feud throughout the evening. “It was a fairly rackety place,” he writes, made up of “noise and dirt” and a “floating population, largely foreigners,” of which he is one (6). Dirt and noise are material and audible signs of being down and out. The techniques of labelling these inhabitants of the Paris slums “eccentric characters” (7) and opening the book in dialogic fashion explicitly foreground the dramatic literariness of the text.<sup>1</sup> But the narrator, acknowledging this, also refrains from telling the story of their lives. He focuses instead on his principal subject: poverty. “The slum,” he writes, “with its dirt and its queer lives, was first an object-lesson in poverty, and then the background of my own experiences. It is for that reason that I try to give some idea of what life was like there” (9). The book is not a collection of character sketches or mini-biographies, but rather a narrative about poverty and a recording of its experience.

Orwell situates his narrator in the middle of things, not unlike a recording instrument. This technique is reminiscent of Christopher Isherwood’s narrator in *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939): “I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking” (9). Both books compete with the emergent media of film and radio. Orwell’s narrator, however, thinks and analyzes. He is not passive. His judgment is obscured by

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<sup>1</sup> The condition of literature and the condition of poverty are signalled together in the Chaucerian epigraph to the book, suggesting poverty is a poetic conceit: “*O scathful harm, condition of povertie!*” (1).

the noise he encounters, noises that are transformative and that oppress life stories. He brings his own judgment to bear on the things he witnesses. Beginning the second chapter with the blankly factual statement, “Life in the quarter” (9), the narrator points out that he often overheard odd conversations in the bistros, and takes pains to introduce the tale-telling “Charlie” with biographical details and gesticulating mannerisms before quoting his speech (10). But the narrator edits the speech, tearing it off with *et cetera*; noise oppresses life stories, shades difference, erases the “I.” By immersing himself in the noise of the slums, Orwell encounters new registers of meaning, which shed light on the experiences of the working poor.

Human noise competes with machines in Orwell’s non-fiction. Machinery and noise go hand-in-hand in most representations of the modern workplace, particularly those which one has to go down to see. Orwell documents his trip down a mine in Northern England in *The Road to Wigan Pier*; in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the narrator washes dishes and performs menial tasks deep in the bowels of the Hôtel X. His journey down “dark labyrinthine passages” reminds him of the lower levels of an ocean liner, even the “humming, whirring noise (it came from the kitchen furnaces) just like the whir of engines,” until he reaches the kitchen, “like nothing I had even seen or imagined—a stifling, low-ceilinged inferno of a cellar, red-lit from the fires, and deafening with oaths and the clanging of pots and pans” (55, 56, 57).

Whereas *Down and Out in Paris and London* purports to be a documentary of labour, Orwell adopts a novelistic, which is to say fictional, representational strategy for his narrative. His first lesson in “*plongeur* morality” (60)—loyalty comes second to pay—is to accept his job knowing full well he will quit as soon as a better one comes along.

Though engaged in one duty or another nearly all the time, the narrator describes how the real work would come in two-hour bursts that the staff called “*un coup de feu*”: “At eight a sudden banging and yelling would break out all through the basement; bells rang on all sides, blue-aproned men rushed through the passages, our service lifts came down with a simultaneous crash, and the waiters on all five floors began shouting Italian oaths down the shafts” (61-62). The frenetic dinner hours are described in more detail in the pages that follow, but the narrator also marks his limit (“I could write pages about the scene without giving the true idea of it”) and recalls the status and literary quality of his representation: “I wish I could be Zola for a little while, just to describe that dinner hour” (65, 64). Evoking the literary model of intense, naturalistic description, the narrator provides another gloss on his authority. Work in the service industry is different from work in factories or mines because of its irregular rhythm, but irrepressible noise remains the same: “The thing that would astonish anyone coming for the first time into the service quarters of a hotel would be the fearful noise and disorder during the rush hours,” the sudden bursts of intense labour impossible without the “noise and quarrelling” (75).<sup>2</sup>

Even leisure is riddled with clamour and raucous behaviour. The noise of a crowd marks its fluid and anarchic identity, both collective and anonymous at once. The bars and bistros ring with shouts and singing, with everyone talking simultaneously, save

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to noise, the narrator remarks on the unexpected dirt he encounters. “Dirtiness is inherent in hotels and restaurants, because sound food is sacrificed to punctuality and smartness” (80), the narrator explains, and “Everywhere in the service quarters dirt festered—a secret vein of dirt, running through the great garish hotel like the intestines through a man’s body” (81). The narrator’s own revulsion unsettles his use of metaphor: the coursing vein is mixed with the image of intestines, which, though lengthy, are in fact rather compact. The misplaced metaphor is a metaphor of misplacement—kitchens should be clean, dirt should not “fester,” and intestines should not course through bodies like veins—and capture his fear of sepsis and anxiety over the ubiquity of dirt. Later, back in London, he notes: “Dirt is a great respecter of persons; it lets you alone when you are well dressed, but as soon as your collar is gone it flies towards you from all directions” (129).



the one moment when the noise ceases and the floor is given over to “Furex,” an aptly named character who “was a Communist when sober” and “violently patriotic when drunk” (93). Despite Furex’s contradictory nature, he provides continuity to the anarchic scenes of leisure by delivering the same speech every Saturday night, “word for word” (94). Predictable as a recording, Furex sings the Marseillaise “in a fine bass voice, with patriotic gurgling noises deep down in his chest” (94), the wine sloshing around in him like the crackle off a gramophone record. The communal space of the bar is one in which the workers sound out the contradictions of national identity, as both patriots and rejects, reclaiming, for the moment at least, the acoustics of the public sphere for their own social and political discourse. Making noise expresses one’s class affiliations and discontent at being at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder; yet the repetition of those same noises, week after week, renders them idle and entertaining rather than revolutionary.

Having documented his experiences working as a *plongeur* in Paris, the narrator steps back to analyze his function in the larger social sphere before the second part of his journey begins in London. His analysis reveals that, by immersing himself in the noises of the working poor, his authorial “I” is muted much as are the biographies of the “characters” he meets. Orwell criticizes the wasted labour of the *plongeur* as a symptom of a faulty system predicated upon socio-cultural fears about the working classes (121). However, he is hesitant to assert his authority, and qualifies his assessment as only “my ideas,” which he makes “without reference to immediate economic questions, and no doubt largely platitudes. I present them as a sample of the thoughts that are put into one’s head by working in a hotel” (121). A symbolic attempt to drop his aitches, Orwell

negates the authorial intention that drives criticism favouring instead the instrumentality of the recorder-reporter. The eye- and the ear-witness of the social travelogue trumps the socialist ideologue, a rhetorical move that Orwell exacts more forcefully in his later travel books. The willed negation of the “I” is not without its literary precedent; T. S. Eliot’s modernist ideal of dissociated sensibility and the elided author figure prominently in the documentary traditions in the 1930s.

Although the narrator notes the differences between the slums of Paris and those of London (128), the anonymity in the indistinguishable noise of the crowd remains. Perhaps taken in by his “patriotic” (126) feelings, the narrator notes how different things seemed in the East End of London after his time in Paris: “It was queer after Paris; everything was so much cleaner and quieter and drearier. One missed the scream of the tram, and the noisy, festering life of the back streets, and the armed men clattering through the squares. The crowds were better dressed and the faces comelier and milder and more alike, without that fierce individuality and malice of the French. There was less drunkenness, and less dirt, and less quarrelling, and more idling” (134). London, it seems, is more civilized, more cultured than Paris—less foreign, more familiar. Immediately following this claim, however, the narrator describes a scene in East London chock full of noise, bustle, quarrel, and song:

It was interesting to watch the crowds. The East London women are pretty (it is the mixture of blood, perhaps), and Limehouse was sprinkled with Orientals—Chinamen, Chittagonian lascars, Dravidians selling silk scarves, even a few Sikhs, come goodness knows how. Here and there were street meetings. In Whitechapel somebody called The Singing

Evangel undertook to save you from hell for the charge of sixpence. In the East India Dock Road the Salvation Army were holding a service. They were singing 'Anybody here like sneaking Judas?' to the tune of 'What's to be done with a drunken sailor?' On Tower Hill two Mormons were trying to address a meeting. Round their platform struggled a mob of men, shouting and interrupting. Someone was denouncing them for polygamists. A lame, bearded man, evidently an atheist, had heard the word God and was heckling angrily. There was a confused uproar of voices. (135)

Patrick Deane, in *History in Our Hands*, has taken this description to be emblematic of the political and social unrest voiced in the literature and other media during the 1930s (9). Christopher Hitchens, in *Why Orwell Matters*, lauds Orwell's ability to distinguish between the different racial ethnicities congregating in London's variegated East End (19). All the elements present in the raucous scenes in Paris slums surface again in more familiar guise: crowds, ethnicities rivalling one another, political meetings, popular religion, singing, shouting, quarrelling. The rhythm of the blunt expressionless style heightens the rising pitch and volume of confusion. This "confused uproar" of the crowd is rendered graphically by the narrator, who quotes the "shouting and interrupting" of several voices separated by the anonymous dash, before cutting it off with the familiar "etc. etc." (135). "I listened for twenty minutes," he goes on, "anxious to learn something about Mormonism, but the meeting never got beyond shouts. It is the general fate of street meetings" (135-36). Quoting the noise of the anonymous crowd in this way renders it meaningful for the reader, thereby taking literature down into the streets. The inclusion

of crowd noise in 1930s literature marks, as Valentine Cunningham in *British Writers of the Thirties* and Samuel Hynes in *The Auden Generation* have argued, a challenge to prevailing, staid notions of culture and class.

Crowd noise is specifically aligned with the male working class. Though Orwell admires and extols the male working-class body in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in *Down and Out in Paris and London* he is disturbed by the low, leaky, noisy bodies of the tramps in London. Herded together in communal lodging houses, bodies resound with the noise of daily routine as much as they do trauma and disorder. Many of the incidents in *Down and Out in Paris and London* are humorous at the narrator's expense, such as the man who "noisily" uses his "chamber pot" several times during the night (131). The narrator describes the man's evacuations as an "unspeakably repellent sound; a foul bubbling and retching, as though the man's bowels were being churned up within him," leaving the narrator with but one hour's sleep in the night (131). Some sounds cannot but be heard. At a Salvation Army shelter, after the narrator has befriended Paddy, who had that "dirty in the grain look that comes of a bread and margarine diet" (149), he describes how the two men were unable to sleep because of a man near them "who had some nervous trouble, shell-shock perhaps, which made him cry out 'Pip!' at irregular intervals. It was a loud, startling noise, something like the toot of a small motor-horn. You never knew when it was coming, and it was a sure preventer of sleep" (157). Though emitting a sound like a machine, the man cannot keep the regular intervals that define the mechanical. This noise, like so many others encountered during the night, makes "sound sleep ... impossible" because of the "perpetual racket" of men herded together in such a fashion (211).

The disturbance caused by noisy bodies is also sexualized, in at least one instance, when the narrator describes his having to fend off the advances of another male lodger, who began to make “homosexual attempts” upon him late in the night, a “nasty experience” but one he is able to deflect because the man is smaller and more feeble (147). His body, the reader is to believe, is soundless. Summarizing the incident, the narrator distances himself by deflecting the fact of the matter he would have otherwise stated himself to the voice of the other man: “Homosexuality is general among tramps of long standing, *he said*” (147, my emphasis). The promiscuous noises of the tramp body, and its dangerous proximity, disturb Orwell.

If impoverished bodies emit noises that disturb, they also emit noises that intrigue. Slang, one might suggest, is tantamount to promiscuous language. While language and patterns of speech in the Paris slums remain resolutely foreign, idiomatic slang in the slum districts of London intone the familiar. Slang, the special vocabulary used by speakers of disreputable character, can also be the special vocabulary of a particular profession or class. While the narrator does not provide a gloss on the French expletives and slang he cites throughout the first part of the book, he does gloss the unusual vocabulary of the English tramp, such as a “kip [sleeping place]” (130) and “London spikes [casual wards]” (139). An entire chapter is dedicated to examining the finer points of London slang and swearing, defining such terms as “gagger,” “nobbler,” “mugfaker,” and “To skipper” (174, 175). He discusses the ways in which some words move up the social scale, such as “bloody” (176), while others fall, noting the magical quality of swear words in so far as once they become swear words, they lose the meaning

that made them oaths in the first place (177).<sup>3</sup>

Depending on one's place on the social scale, and one's grasp of the seemingly unlimited inflections of the English language, slang terms such as those the narrator cites and glosses could be entirely unintelligible, no better than foreign words, though perhaps worse because they still bear the familiar ring of one's native tongue. Idiomatic speech can sound like gibberish, even noise, to the uninitiated. Slang, often associated with "foul language"—actual profanity is suggestively occluded by the em-dashes throughout the book—is inflected with social distinction and essential to the grammar of poverty. Slang has a richness of meaning for the narrator that other sources of noise do not. But slang is not noise. Promiscuity and noise consign the beggar's silent request for charity into a painful plea. Beggars are, according to the narrator, legally obliged to make noise in order to avoid breaking the law: "As the law now stands, if you approach a stranger and ask him for twopence, he can call a policeman and get you seven days for begging. But if you make the air hideous by droning 'Nearer, my God, to Thee,' or scrawl some chalk daubs on the pavement, or stand about with a tray of matches—in short, if you make a nuisance of yourself—you are held to be following a legitimate trade and not begging" (172). In other words, the beggar under English law is bound to make noise in order to live; it is inscribed in his culture and part of his everyday practice.<sup>4</sup> Making noise is deemed useful and entertaining, an appeal to economics and culture. Beggars exist below the working-classes—whose labouring noises earn them a wage—but the silence of

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<sup>3</sup> Orwell puts much of his knowledge of slang to use in the tramping scenes in *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935).

<sup>4</sup> Contrariwise, the narrator recalls a scene in a church near King's Cross Station that gave out free tea once a week to local tramps. The scene was "disgusting" to the narrator because the one-hundred or so tramps, a "ring of dirty, hairy faces ... openly jeering" and making "far more noise than the minister," made worship "impossible" for everyone else in the congregation as "revenge" for "having humiliated us by feeding us" (183). The hush and silence of charity is, in this sense, too humiliating.

begging and the charity it implores cannot be tolerated.

The social mores and legal writs that encourage the noisiness of begging and tramping could be done away with, according to the narrator. In setting out some “general remarks about tramps,” the narrator hopes to overturn certain prejudices (200). He argues that a tramp roams because, as a car keeps to the left-hand side of the road, a law compels him to (201); not all tramps are drunkards (202); tramping is unpleasant and plagued by the three evils of hunger, woman-lessness, and enforced idleness (203-4). “What is needed,” he writes, “is to depauperise” the tramp by finding him work, so that a “sound day’s work” can be translated into “sound food” (206, 207). To combat the impossibility of obtaining a “sound sleep” in the lodging-houses, the narrator proposes legislation to ensure the necessary modicum of comfort (211). Reducing the hardship and concomitant noise of the tramp’s life takes a few sound principles, upon which the narrator has, in the preceding two-hundred pages, established his authority to wit. However, comparing his “trivial story” to the “travel diary” in terms of interest, the narrator, as he does in closing out the Paris slums in the first half of the narrative, backs away from this authority when he states that he has provided only a glimpse into the “world that awaits you if you are ever penniless,” provided a view of he suggests that even in that he has only seen “the fringe of poverty” (213). “Still,” he has learned several things about “being hard up,” and that “is a beginning” (213). That beginning, and the question of his authority to speak on matters of a class other than his own, would resume in force in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

As many commentators have noted, smell is the dominant sense in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Orwell’s revulsion at the filth that plagues working-class spaces marks the

physical equivalent of a class prejudice that he cannot drop as readily as his aitches. Revulsion at the smells he encounters in the working-centres of Yorkshire and Lancashire causes Orwell to lose credibility with some critics, much as his critique of English Socialism in the second part of the book loses him ground with the orthodox Left. Other critics find this exemplary of Orwell's honesty. Smell is essential to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, but so is hearing. Sound, and more particularly, noise, is as prevalent a marker of class distinction, of economic imbalance, of inhumane labour, of social and socialist disorder, as smell is in this book about the "condition of England" (v). One even finds a metaphoric counterpart, as Richard Hoggart's Introduction to the Penguin edition points out, in Orwell's style: the way it "hammers" away at the reader through second-person demonstrative address ("You see this business of ...") and the overuse of extreme adjectives, adverbs, and nouns ("dreadful" and "unspeakable"). As Hoggart puts it, "We are all assumed to have shared such experiences and it all makes for the peculiar intimacy of the writing" (x). That intimacy heightens the narrator's physical revulsions to certain things, such as a full chamber pot under the breakfast table (14). He patrols class distinctions: "I sometimes think that the price of liberty is not so much eternal vigilance as eternal dirt" (67).

Orwell opens *The Road to Wigan Pier* from the perspective of a reporter. Like his description of street noise in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, he records the audibility of class differences in *The Road to Wigan Pier*: "The first sound in the mornings was the clumping of the mill-girls' clogs down the cobbled street. Earlier than that, I suppose, there were factory whistles which I was never awake to hear" (3). Drawing the reader's attention not only to those early morning sounds but also to his language—he alliterates



the “cl” (varied in “cobbled”), perhaps to emphasize the laboriousness of the morning trudge, perhaps to versify its rhythm—Orwell again foregrounds the literariness of reportage. Though Orwell aestheticizes the morning walk to work, adapting its rhythm to his own, he simultaneously draws the reader’s attention to what can *not* be heard or represented in this account: the factory whistles that call the working-classes to task. Hence, the “mill-girls’ clogs” “clumping” is not in fact the first sound in the mornings, only the first sound given ear in the account. The speculative acknowledgement of the liminal sounds that signify working-class life indicate the documentarian’s restrictions, ones that are, like it or not, bound up with class.<sup>5</sup> But these do, however, lend authenticity to the account and provide a rhetorical advantage to Orwell in the second half of the book where the exclusion of certain noises becomes essential to class conflict.

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell elides working-class complaint—certain noises will not be reported beyond paraphrase—in order to focus instead on the noise of labour. Mining noise is unbearable and inhumane. Though one might find the mine quite “peaceful” on a Sunday, at nearly all other times the “machines are roaring” and the “place is like hell” (18). Once one has actually made it down the shaft and crawled to the coal face, Orwell explains, the “first impression of all, overmastering everything else for a while, is the frightful, deafening din from the conveyor belt which carries the coal away,” the “unending rattle” of which in such confined space “is rather like the rattle of a machine gun” (19, 20). Work is no better than war, perhaps even harder on the body. Getting down the mine or “travelling” to the coal face is itself demanding work, and the agility and stamina required to work in the pits for such periods of time are feats that

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<sup>5</sup> As Beatrix Campbell argues elsewhere, these restrictions also have to do with gender as Orwell renders nothing of the state of the Lancashire cotton mills whose labourers were predominately women (101).

Orwell finds astounding. Full of admiration for their “iron” and “most noble bodies” (20), Orwell describes the nobility of the miner’s body persisting through the “ugliness” (97) of industrial mining. Unlike the bodies of the impoverished men Orwell caroused with in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, miner’s bodies are, as Beatrix Campbell suggests, “represented as beautiful, statuesque, shaden men” (Campbell 97). Campbell suggests that miners are “men’s love object,” for they combine hero and victim, command reverence and protection, but most of all “because of its work and because it works” (Campbell 97). Of the machines used down in the mines, the coal cutter “makes one of the most awful noises I have ever heard,” and is often followed by electric drills and blasting powder to loosen the coal enough that it can be broken up and dug out, making the work in the confined space especially noisy (27). Machinery speeds up the process of coal cutting, blasting, and extracting, but the miners contend it also makes the work more dangerous: “the vibration, which tends to shake everything loose, and the noise, which makes it harder to detect signs of danger,” place the miners at greater risk of a roof collapse (41).

Although modernist noise sometimes signifies an alarm or warning, under mining conditions the sensitivity of the ear to its surroundings is a matter of life and death, which noise, in fact, tends to negate or compromise. For Orwell, much as the factory whistles that sound too early in the morning, the noise and gruelling physical demands of mining are beyond him: “the work would kill me in a few weeks” (29). As with the sirens that summon the workers, Orwell chooses to treat these sounds reductively, as having no meaning beyond their immediate function. As a documentarian, Orwell can hear the noise and witness the labour and its conditions, but he cannot endure it, and therefore

cannot give it meaning.

Coal is, according to Orwell, the great levelling factor in modern civilization. Coal is needed during times of peace and war: “In order that Hitler may march the goose-step, that the Pope may denounce Bolshevism, that the cricket crowds may assemble at Lord’s, that the Nancy poets may scratch one another’s backs, coal has got to be forthcoming” (29). Hardly hiding his own prejudices, he suggests that coal is needed by all, regardless of status and class. Orwell exaggerates, but his point is genuine: the harvesting of coal beneath the earth’s surface is an essential part of the economy and a way of life throughout Britain and Europe, “second in importance” only to the agriculturalist (18). Coal may be the great leveller of conflicting classes and ideologies, the fuel of civilization, but as these conditions in the working-class districts of Northern England indicate, the costs are not shared by all.

For Orwell, the conditions of the working-classes in the towns and districts that he documents tell a much larger story than the one based solely in class. Mass civilization and technological progress disrupt traditional English culture, notably in the lives and homes of the working classes. While “culture” is unquestionably a class-based notion for Orwell—for men without work, libraries, picture shows, and lectures provide warm spaces and temporary refuges, not arenas for aesthetic contemplation and self-education—it is the general trend that worries him. Its tendencies appear most pronounced amongst the working classes where football pools take precedence over matters of domestic and international politics. Cheap “luxury” items become “palliatives” that displace necessities and essentials: “Twenty million people are underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio. What we have lost in food we

have gained in electricity. Whole sections of the working class who have been plundered of all they really need are being compensated, in part, by cheap luxuries which mitigate the surface of life” (82-83). The surface, in the now too familiar reasoning, has supplanted the depth with more surfaces, and food, in a sense, becomes secondary to technology.

Radios and electricity, and the forces of a market economy, disrupt the traditional, inherited way of life, one that Orwell idealizes with the quiet coal-fire around which working-class families sit: “Curiously enough it is *not* the triumphs of modern engineering, nor the radio, nor the cinematograph, nor the five thousand novels which are published yearly, nor the crowds at Ascot and the Eton and Harrow match, but the memory of working-class interiors—especially as I sometimes saw them in my childhood before the war, when England was still prosperous—that reminds me that our age has not been altogether a bad one to live in” (109). While Orwell records the noises that condition working-class environments in the first part of the book, he lingers on this picture of enduring peace and serenity, on stability. This picture—silent and familiar—is the one Orwell wishes to leave in the reader’s mind as he turns his commentary into criticism. As Breton argues, “Orwell’s working class is closer to the Gospel of Work than any other class. Its values are the values of Work, from a lack of whining when faced with rough work, an instinct to sacrifice themselves or at least approach a task with as much effort as possible, to an enthusiasm for home life and traditional morality” (Breton 171).

In the second part of the book, he focuses his criticism on what he considers an equally damaging noise to the condition of class, culture, and socialism in England as

machines are to the working class body: the ideological crank. Socialism, Orwell argues, attracts extremists and courts wayward opinion. Assuming the role of "*advocatus diaboli*" (160), Orwell critiques socialism in England for its nonconformist elements: "One sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist and feminist in England" (161). These form a concept of the eccentric far removed from the stock notions of justice, of common decency, upon which, Orwell believes, socialism is based (164). Though he figures it as the "smell of 'progress'" that attracts certain types to Socialism like "bluebottles to a dead cat," Orwell critiques the contingent of loud proponents that should be muffled if socialism is to attract the "ordinary decent person" (169). Socialism suffers from the literary man "uttering screams of venomous libel against his 'bourgeois' colleagues" (168) and from the "shrill wail" and "screams" of "machine-worship" made by those "thoroughly at home in the modern mechanised world" who push for a civilization in which "*nothing goes wrong*" at the cost of "getting bigger and noisier all the time" (178, 179, 180). Noisemakers welcome noise, so long as it suits their racket.

Technological progress is not, however, social progress. Orwell bemoans the fact that "the blaring of a radio is not only a more acceptable but a more *normal* background to their thoughts than the lowing of cattle or the song of birds" (190). "In a healthy world," he continues in this conservative vein, "there would be no demand for tinned food, aspirins, gramophones, gas-pipe chairs, machine guns, daily newspapers, telephones, motor-cars, etc., etc.; and on the other hand there would be a constant demand for the things the machine cannot produce. But meanwhile the machine is here,

and its corrupting effects are almost irresistible" (190). Campbell criticizes Orwell for sounding the "revolutionary snob" for chalking everything up to "bad taste" (Campbell 224), but that is not the whole point. The noises of technology reverberate in social life; yet the disruptive quality of the social life of things, the vicious circle, is unavoidable: mechanization degrades taste while degraded taste increases the demand for machine-made items.<sup>6</sup> Progress and the machine fall in with the capitalist design, which, according to Orwell, debases culture.

These tendencies, Orwell warns, lay the groundwork for a shift to the political right, to fascism at home and abroad. The "vision of the totalitarian state" is being substituted with the "vision of the totalitarian world" (200). The essential ideals of Socialism, "justice and liberty," words which should "ring like a bugle across the world," remain buried beneath the current image called to mind: on the one hand, "aeroplanes, tractors and huge glittering factories of glass and concrete; on the other, a picture of vegetarians with wilting beards, of Bolshevik commissars (half gangster, half gramophone), of earnest ladies in sandals, shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables, escaped Quakers, birth-control fanatics and Labour Party backstairs-crawlers" (201). Socialism has lost its revolutionary potential in England, according to Orwell; it no longer represents "revolution and the overthrow of tyrants," but rather "smells of crankishness, machine-worship and the stupid cult of Russia. Unless you can remove that smell, and very rapidly, Fascism may win" (201). Orwell focuses on the "smell of crankishness" (207), a middle-class equivalent to the offensive filth he encounters among

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<sup>6</sup> Orwell adds an exceptional footnote on the ways in which capitalism is inseparable from mechanization, and vice versa: "Some years ago someone invented a gramophone needle that would last for decades. One of the big gramophone companies bought up the patent rights, and that was the last that was ever heard of it" (192n1).

the working-classes, though his metaphors—the “gangster gramophone,” “Marxists chewing polysyllables,” and sandal-wearers “burbling about dialectical materialism” (208)—are predominantly auditory. Removing the “smell of crankishness” from Socialism involves doing away with, or at least lessening, the sounds of orthodoxy and the discourses of “progress.” Noise is not fettered to the working classes alone. It exists among the middle-classes too, and is all the more disruptive, and frightening, when it is bolstered by hate.

In concluding his critique of the condition of England, Orwell recommends that his own travels down—in both *Down and Out in Paris and London* and *The Road to Wigan Pier*—provide a model worthy of emulation for the entire middle-class interested in fostering socialism. Combining critique with a call for simplicity, Orwell concludes by suggesting that the “issue of class, as distinct from mere economic status” (208), must be dealt with in a way that unifies rather than divides. For the moment, the “different classes must be persuaded to act together without,” he suggests, “being asked to drop their class-differences” (211). Emphasizing the economic factors over the cultural ones by means of “intelligent propaganda” will ensure that the essential aims of Socialism are “compatible with common decency” (214). While the economic situation cannot be rectified overnight, the common currencies of English culture (exemplified by the working-class family gathered quietly round the hearth) and humanism provide the basis for a renovation of the unnecessary and excessive noises (coal mining, over-mechanization, ideological crankishness) that haunt current conditions and hamper the class-conscious ideals of Socialism. The costs of the current system, Orwell contends, are too heavy, and the end result could be the realization of a totalitarian world. The

alternate road, the one that leads from the slums of Paris and London to Wigan Pier, marks a downward movement, but one stripped of its negative connotations: the sinking down of the middle class “into the working class where we belong” will not be “as dreadful as we feared,” Orwell argues, “for, after all, we have nothing to lose but our aitches” (215). In this sense, the working-class idiom becomes a revolutionary mode of speech, which Orwell would encounter again during his experiences fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

### Language and Listening in *Homage to Catalonia*

*Homage to Catalonia* marks the culmination of Orwell’s travels as “a foreigner” (1) and his most astute ear-witness reportage. Propaganda, war, and noise coincide during the war in Spain, and Orwell heeds them intently. From the noises of warfare to the shouts of the propagandists, Orwell’s prose is tuned with sound. Orwell documents his arrival with the highest of hopes for a socialism based on common decency, justice, and liberty. Despite the language barriers of the international brigade, he discovers camaraderie and “utter intimacy” (2) almost immediately as the gulf of class dissipates amidst the “social equality between officers and men” (27). He senses in Barcelona the revolutionary potential of the working classes “in the saddle” (3). That potential is thwarted over the course of the civil war, as infighting and vicious propaganda campaigns turn truths into falsehoods, friends into enemies. Rumour, Orwell claims, is “endemic in war” (67). The broadcast method of attack on the front lines, where propaganda is volleyed across the fields as are bullets, turns deeply sinister amidst the street fighting in Barcelona, and the vortex of misinformation and half-truth shifts to the



centres of influence beyond the conflict. Having listened his way through the Spanish Civil War Orwell, wounded, escapes with his life. Disenchanted, he turns the experience into a lesson on the changing landscape of European politics.

War creates a range of noises. Orwell's militia column was an "extraordinary-looking rabble" (7), and his first time on the front lines was "obviously quiet" (16). Orwell, old enough to remember the Great War, perceives this rag-tag group of young men as less than heroic: their shouts "were meant to be war-like and menacing, but which, from those childish throats, sounded as pathetic as the cries of kittens" (18-19). These pathetic sounds seem ill-matched for the "vicious crack" (22) of the enemy bullets to come, even though many are "meaningless bullets wandering among the empty valleys" (24) that rarely find a human target. Orwell translates some of the noises into meaningful units of sound that bear "vicious" or "meaningless" intent. Others are left as noises, appearing as onomatopes. When Orwell's first intense gun fight does appear to materialize with "utter darkness and diabolical noise," the bullets flying "crack—zip—crack" and shells "whistling over" (46), he realizes the Fascists were less "attacking" than "merely wasting cartridges and making a cheerful noise to celebrate the fall of Málaga" (47). Discerning the trajectory and intentionality of militia noise is a thematic preoccupation of the narrative. Orwell provides a glimpse of a war that is not fought according to plan. Growing increasingly acclimatized to this element of built-in distraction—"meaningless," "wandering," "wasting"—is all part of Orwell's ear training.

Orwell begins to represent non-verbal noises with more literal accuracy in *Homage to Catalonia*, where war and propaganda gauge international crisis. His use of onomatopoeia—the formation of words imitative of sounds and sounds associated with

the things or action being named—escalates in *Homage to Catalonia* because of the difficulty of representing militia sounds in literature. Onomatopoeia incorporates noise directly into the text without having to make sense of the sound: “crack—zip—crack” (46), “whizz—BOOM!” (63), “zwing—crash!” (64), “Crack—crack, rattle—rattle, roar” (117). Sometimes he attributes meaning to these, and sometimes he does not. The sense is supposed to be in the sound. Orwell syncopates the rhythm of these sounds with commas and dashes. These notations of sounds are also ways of raising alarm in the text, of incorporating noise as directly as one can into the literary accounting of war. While this lends authenticity to Orwell-the-ear-witness who positions himself at the centre of things, it also creates anticipation for the warning bell he sounds at the end of his narrative. He predicts a bomb blast will be necessary to awaken British people.

Orwell anticipates this blast with a tide of noisy acronyms. Discussing why he went to Spain in Appendix I, he comments there as well on the “kaleidoscope of political parties and trade unions, with their tiresome names—PSUC, POUM, FAI, CNT, UGT, JCI, JSU, AIT—they merely exasperated me. It looked at first sight as though Spain were suffering from a plague of initials” (197).<sup>7</sup> This acronymous noise is literally everywhere—on posters, armbands, newspapers, walls—for acronyms, bundling a great

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<sup>7</sup> Writing less about acronyms than abbreviations, Orwell laments oversimplification of political difference by means of the shortened word in the Newspeak Appendix in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “Even in the early decades of the twentieth century, telescoped words and phrases had been one of the characteristic features of political language; and it had been noticed that the tendency to use abbreviations of this kind was most marked in totalitarian countries and totalitarian organizations. Examples were such words as *Nazi*, *Gestapo*, *Comintern*, *Inprecorr*, *Agitprop*. In the beginning the practice had been adopted as it were instinctively, but in Newspeak it was used with a conscious purpose. It was perceived that in thus abbreviating a name one narrowed and subtly altered its meaning, by cutting out most of the associations that would otherwise cling to it. The words *Communist International*, for instance, call up a composite picture of universal human brotherhood, red flags, barricades, Karl Marx, and the Paris Commune. The word *Comintern*, on the other hand, suggests merely a tightly-knit organization and a well-defined body of doctrine. It refers to something almost as easily recognized, and as limited in purpose, as a chair or a table. *Comintern* is a word that can be uttered almost without taking thought, whereas *Communist International* is a phrase over which one is obliged to linger at least momentarily” (NEF 320-21).

deal of information and representing numerous political factions and ideologies in the conflict, are visual noise, particularly if one is not accustomed to their coding. Orwell's ability to cut through the "thicket of acronyms" (Slater 153) and explain their differences and nuances in the text is a microcosm of his ability to listen his way through the auditory chaos of political catastrophe abets his cultural critique in the modern period.

War hones listeners, during both intense fighting and long periods of inaction. Listening is at first a consolation for the lack of serious fighting on the front line: "The scream and crash of the shells was actually looked upon as a mild diversion" (50). The more skillful listener is both the better soldier and the more attentive documentarian, however much the motivations behind these roles and duties are mixed: "One learned almost immediately the mysterious art of knowing by the sound of a shell how close it will fall" (50). Orwell's militia also deployed listeners "into no-man's land to lie in ditches near the Fascist lines and listen for sounds (bugle-calls, motor-horns, and so forth) that indicated activity" in Huesca; not only could the number of Fascist troops be checked by "listeners' reports," the listening patrols had "special orders to report the ringing of church bells" since the Fascists, they were told, "heard mass before going into action" (51).

Listening has a long history in the tactics and strategies of combat manoeuvres. Indeed, a combatant cannot avoid listening to the horrific sounds of war. As occurs with the multiple acronyms, noise inflects the grammar of reportage. Listening refines sound into meaningful categories: "the days went on the unseen but audible guns began each to assume a distinct personality. There were the two batteries of Russian 75-mm guns which fired from close in our rear and which somehow evoked in my mind the picture of

a fat man hitting a golf-ball. These were the Russian guns I had seen—or heard, rather. They had a low trajectory and a very high velocity, so that you heard the cartridge explosion, the whizz and the shell-burst almost simultaneously” (63). Some heavy artillery guns do embody menacing sounds, such as those behind Monflorite which had “a deep, muffled roar that was like the baying of distant chained-up monsters” (64), while others continue to assume almost whimsical sounds, such as the old heavy gun at Mount Aragón, which fired shells that “whistled over so slowly” and “sounded like nothing so much as a man riding along on a bicycle and whistling” (64).

While the anthropomorphization of sound is common in descriptions of military noise, the “chained-up monsters” are fairy-tales at best. The listener, fabricating narratives from isolated sounds, infers meaning that may well be off the mark. Characterizing weapons in terms of their innocuous noises domesticates them, makes them familiar, knowable. But others remain horrendous:

The trench-mortars, small though they were, made the most evil sound of all [...]; they go off with a devilish metallic crash, as of some monstrous globe of brittle steel being shattered on an anvil. Sometimes our aeroplanes flew over and let loose the aerial torpedoes whose tremendous echoing roar makes the earth tremble even at two miles’ distance. The shell-bursts from the Fascist anti-aircraft guns dotted the sky like cloudlets in a bad water-colour, but I never saw them get within a thousand yards of an aeroplane. When an aeroplane swoops down and uses its machine-gun the sound, from below, is like the fluttering of wings. (64)

These deepened descriptions of the acoustics of war are intended to instill in the reader

the dreadfulness of war, but language seems inadequate when to capture the “doubly diabolical noise” of a shell crashing into pavement the narrator employs the onomatopoeic “zwing—crash! zwing—crash!” (64). When the literal level of language comes up short, Orwell relies on these more illustrative metaphors—myth, painting, birds-in-flight—to supplement a perceived lack of fidelity between phenomenon and language, experience and reportage.<sup>8</sup>

But the relationship between language and war, between meaning and noise, is precisely Orwell’s point. At times, even, the real weapon of choice was the megaphone rather than the rifle: “Being unable to kill your enemy you shouted at him instead. This method of warfare is so extraordinary that it needs explaining” (44). If you cannot kill the enemy with a bullet, the logic goes, you kill his morale with words, putting the broadcast aesthetic of the wireless into service; simplified, perhaps, though no less amplified. Militants shouting back and forth with megaphones enact a double form of combat as they battle for both the ground under their feet, the material gains of war, and the landscape of the mind. The man “who did the shouting at the PSUC post” near Orwell’s militia “was an artist at the job” (45). Certain machine-gunners on the Government side even had “shouting-duty” with megaphones in which they “shouted a set-piece, full of revolutionary sentiments which explained to the Fascist soldiers that they were ... fighting against their own class” (44). The megaphones substitute for the out-of-date rifles that no longer shoot accurately. The soldiers, “artists” reciting scripts, take aim with the broadcast aesthetic to reassemble the noises of war into meaningful segments of

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<sup>8</sup> Of course, in war, one also must be quiet. Orwell’s militia moves up to a fascist parapet in the rain when the “mud was unspeakable” (68) and “every step you took was slop—slop, slop—slop” (69). The soldiers cannot keep quiet. When they are heard, the fighting grows intense and “the noise was deafening. It was the unbroken, drum-like roar of massed rifles which I was used to hearing from a little distance; this was the first time I had been in the middle of it” (76).

class-conscious propaganda, reshaping the percussive and explosive sounds of war-metal into detonations of morale, so as better to redraw the landscape the conflict. The fascist forces also dropped newspapers and pamphlets from the air, not always bombs (46).

Propaganda and shouting are as critical to the war effort as actual combat and fighting. The fascist shells were “wretchedly bad,” not causing much damage and exploding only seventy-five percent of the time, which prompted tales of sabotage in munitions factories and rumours of “unexploded shells in which, instead of the charge, there was found a scrap of paper saying ‘Red Front’” (50). As again with the “old shell with a nickname of its own which travelled daily to and fro, never exploding” (51), these examples expose the way in which the Spanish Civil War becomes entrenched in the spreading of deadly words. With propaganda and rumour, words literally explode with meaning; Orwell’s account spells out the politics of literature and reportage of the 1930s.

Recording the noises of war also means registering the noises made *about* the war. Propaganda and rumour make Orwell’s experience of the war unendurable. Following an inconsequential firefight, the media published and broadcast reports of a “tremendous attack with cavalry and tanks” (47), a gross exaggeration Orwell confirms, and the first resounding instance of the way that misinformation circulates during wartime. The distinction between active engagement and reportage heightens Orwell’s principal critique of the political failures of the late 1930s. Orwell realizes from this media report that the truth of war was much more spectral than he initially believed it to be: “It set up in my mind the first vague doubt about this war in which, hitherto, the rights and wrongs had seemed so beautifully simple” (48). Though *Homage to Catalonia* is not a novel, one could read it as a bildungsroman in which Orwell receives an education in political acuity,

moving from hopeful innocence to ominous experience.

The spirit of the war changes dramatically upon Orwell's return to Barcelona. Following his three-and-a-half months on the front, Orwell notices how "the revolutionary atmosphere had vanished" (93) and the "'revolutionary' forms of speech were dropping out of use" (99). Fear and suspicion replace revolutionary currents. Underneath the "surface-aspect of the town" and business-as-usual "gaiety" was "an unmistakable and horrible feeling of political rivalry and hatred" that pitted the Anarchists against the Communists, previously allies (113). Street-fighting breaks out. The once audible notes of revolution are overtaken by intense propaganda and accusation. CNT workers and the Assault Guards skirmish at the Telephone Exchange (106), while the POUM engage in a similar exchange by a local café (114). Orwell describes it as one of the "most unbearable periods of my whole life" for its "nerve-racking" and "disillusioning" effects (116). The noise of the street-fighting transforms the city: "And the whole huge town of a million people was locked in a sort of violent inertia, a nightmare of noise without movement," and "all the while the devilish noise, echoing from thousands of stone buildings, went on and on and on, like a tropical rainstorm. Crack—crack, rattle—rattle, roar—sometimes it died away to a few shots, sometimes it quickened to a deafening fusillade, but it never stopped while daylight lasted, and punctually next dawn it started again" (117).

The acoustic effects of the city amplify the tenor of the violence and darken its nightmarish atmosphere. This picture is hardly the glimpse of urban life that the "city symphony" film genre promulgated in the 1930s, and its acoustic accompaniment bears little in the way of harmony. Though Orwell grows accustomed to the "hellish noise"

and diverts his attention to “reading a succession of Penguin Library books” (118-19), the “devilish racket” continues and is even increased by the *agents provocateurs* who touched off “masses of explosives in order to increase the general noise and panic” (120). The amplification of noise and violence in the streets of the once revolutionary city provide acoustic equivalents to the degrading political situation. Even when the streets are silent, that silence is pregnant with the expectation of violence: “There were times when I caught my ears listening for the first shots. It was as though some huge evil intelligence were brooding over the town” (159). Gone are the revolutionary forms of speech. They are replaced by the sounds of internal conflict and the suspicious silence of anticipation. Evil has moved into the neighbourhood, as silence and as noise. In T. S. Eliot’s short story, “Eeldrop and Appleplex” (1917), evil manifests itself in sound: “They had chosen the rooms and the neighborhood with great care. There are evil neighborhoods of noise and evil neighborhoods of silence, and Eeldrop and Appleplex preferred the latter, as being the more evil. It was a shady street, its windows were heavily curtained; and over it hung the cloud of a respectability which has something to conceal” (*The Little Review* 4.1: 7). The street noises in Barcelona indicate that something is happening. Silence, as Eliot notices and as Orwell fears, disguises oppression.

Orwell bolsters his account of the Spanish Civil War and the propaganda that clouds its meaning by positioning his account nearer to the centre. Delving into the broken spell of revolution in Spain and the paranoia caused by propaganda and infighting, Orwell distinguishes his narrative by its proximity to the war. Orwell is close enough to be shot in the throat while on the front lines, his wound lending his account of the conflict an authority and acuity absent from the mass media and propaganda



machines bellowing out misinformation. Calling attention to his narrative as “only my personal experiences,” Orwell nonetheless aims at the “balanced view” of the Barcelona fighting as distinct from the “journalists at a distance” who were publishing “intentionally misleading” reports (137). Denounced by the communist propaganda machine (because a member of POUM), Orwell perceives that “the posters screaming from the hoardings that I and everyone like me was a Fascist spy” (186). Even mute posters carry the sound of accusation. Orwell scrawls the initials of his party militia in an attempt to make some noise of his own: “The passageways of several smart restaurants had ‘*Visca POUM!*’ scrawled on them as large as I could write it” (190).

Acronymous noise and the political factions they signify—acrimonious noise—seem to be everywhere in Spain. The difference between POUM (Anarchists) and PSUC (Communists) could seem but a negligible difference in initials, but, Orwell learns, “So great is the difference between two sets of initials!” (198). What irks Orwell most is the worst things were being said and written by “the journalists in the rear,” as “all the war war-propaganda, all the screaming and lies and hatred, comes invariably from people who are not fighting” (214). This taught Orwell that the “Left-wing press is every bit as spurious and dishonest as that of the Right,” footnoting that only the *Manchester Guardian* were capable of honesty (215).<sup>9</sup> The sham of their reporting is unveiled by the noise of their shouts. “It is the same in all wars,” he concludes, “the soldiers do the fighting, the journalists do the shouting, and no true patriot ever gets near a front-line trench, except on the briefest of propaganda-tour” (215). Orwell’s self-conscious reportage in *Homage to*

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<sup>9</sup> Orwell details in Appendix II the contradictions and inaccuracies printed in the Left-wing press, such as the *Daily Worker*, and questions an article by John Langdon-Davies in the *News Chronicle*: “These are not the words of an eye-witness” (240-41).

*Catalonia* foregrounds its limitations as a means of reinforcing its credibility and, thereby, gaining rhetorical force. “It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes,” he writes, “and consciously or unconsciously everyone writes as a partisan. In case I have not said this somewhere earlier in the book I will say it now: beware of my partisanship, my mistakes of fact and the distortion inevitably caused by my having seen only one corner of events. And beware of exactly the same things when you read any other book on this period of the Spanish war” (195). Using his honesty about partisanship as a rhetorical strategy, Orwell repositions the reader of the travel book as an active participant in making sense and drawing conclusions about the critical issues and uncertainties surrounding the Spanish Civil War.

Orwell marks the real political difference of an isolated England from the crisis on European soil as a potential cataclysmic one. “In England,” he points out, “political intolerance is not yet taken for granted. There is political persecution in a petty way; if I were a coalminer I would not care to be known to the boss as a Communist; but the ‘good party man’, the gangster-gramophone of continental politics, is still a rarity, and the notion of ‘liquidating’ or ‘eliminating’ everyone who happens to disagree with you does not yet seem natural. It seemed only too natural in Barcelona” (159). Orwell identifies a new noisy element on the political scene as explicitly foreign-made, but, if imported, one capable of taking England from its enlightened democracy and freedom of speech to totalitarianism and political persecution. The “gangster-gramophone of continental politics,” as the compound metaphor suggests, is loud and unlawful in voice and action. Blaring ideologically repetitious, prerecorded messages, and capable of perpetrating the most heinous of violent acts, the “gangster-gramophone” provides the first audible note

of the Party members Orwell imagines in the nightmarish, totalitarian future of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Orwell's return home in *Homage to Catalonia*, brings with it a warning derived from his experiences in Spain, and one pitched at a volume intended to jostle readers into an awareness of the encroaching dangers abroad. Orwell ruminates on the peacefulness of outer London and the serenity of the England of his childhood, an England seemingly unaware of anything calamitous that might be happening in any other part of the world:

And then England—southern England, probably the sleekest landscape in the world. [...] The industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface. Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flower, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen—all sleeping the deep, deep sleep of England, from which I sometimes fear that we shall never wake till we are jerked out of it by the roar of bombs. (196)

Like Evelyn Waugh does in his travel books, such as *Labels*, Orwell marks the homecoming of the travel writer with an emphatic, almost prophetic note. Waxing nostalgic on the England of his childhood untouched by the dirt and smoke of the

industrial work-towns too north to really matter and unfettered by posters telling of anything but sport and national heritage, Orwell insists that the quiet dream of England may well be a fateful sleep. Listening to the changing notes of war, propaganda, and politics in the Spanish conflict, Orwell hears in them a precarious future: England will not be spared her conflict. *Homage to Catalonia*, then, sounds the first alarm, and what begins as homage ends in dire prediction.

### False Alarms

With the exclusion of *A Clergyman's Daughter*, Orwell's realist fiction of the 1930s mocks the social conscience novel and is steeped in irony and satire. The three protagonists of *Burmese Days*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and *Coming Up for Air* all find fault with the current order of things and beckon change. In each case, they fall or are brought shy of effecting change, and reinforce the status quo. If Orwell is imagining a viable social and political critique in his realist depictions of the 1930s, he continues to flinch at drawing conclusions. It is one thing to set up your protagonists as scapegoats for a fault-riddled order of things from which an authorial presence remains one step clear; it is quite another to have them throw up their hands. Christopher Hitchens reads these 1930s novels as mere "throat clearing" for the political thesis Orwell advances in the 1940s: "These four pre-war efforts constitute a sort of amateur throat-clearing. It was *Animal Farm* which, as Orwell later wrote, 'was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole'" (Hitchens 186). "The ambiguity of the novels, in which morality or decency are seemingly gained by capitulating to amorality or indecency," Rob Breton writes, "reflects

a hard, undialectical split between history and humanity” (208). The novels lack the political purpose with which he unifies his later work, but even there, in the 1940s, humanity fares poorly against history.

Orwell’s four naturalistic novels, all published in the 1930s, develop characters who rail against the prevailing systems of their time. Three of these protagonists—John Flory, Gordon Comstock, George Bowling—are fatalists. Two of them, Comstock and Bowling, are alarmists. The alarms they sound indicate the culmination of several crises troubling the 1930s, which Orwell imaginatively engages through irony and satire: the decline of the British Empire, the changing cultural values and trappings of modern civilization, and the crises of political modernity. These issues are signalled in the novels by the noises they generate. In *Burmese Days*, chatter and screaming haunt Flory with the contradictions of colonialism until shooting and rioting, violent responses to imperialism, claim him. In *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, the noises and confusion of the material world challenge the resolve of spirit and the charity of Dorothy’s faith. In *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying*, urban clatter and din mark the modern experience, which Gordon channels into poetry as a preserve of individuality and cultured sensibility poised against (not without irony) the moneyed “jingles” of advertising amidst fantasies of coming apocalypse. In *Coming Up for Air*, ubiquitous radios and gramophones indicate cultural entropy and call up in George’s mind the reverberations of imminent destruction. Flory’s hope for a decent life in Burma within the “stifling” code of the “pukka sahib” dictates marriage to a decent woman of “civilized society” (66, 67), but the Burmese woman he discards will not be silenced. Gordon and George both fantasize about the coming war as fit retribution for entropic modernity, but each finds a way to overcome his aversion to the

racket.

Noise differentiates British Imperialism from Burmese culture in *Burmese Days*, and correlates speculations on the justices and injustices of colonialism. Considering the novel in relation to Orwell's other works of the 1930s, Slater suggests that "the jungle become the central metaphor for the seemingly uncontrollable forces that encroach upon one's sense of individuality" (29). Orwell represents several pairings in the novel in order to illustrate the conflict of colonial rule: Flory's cultured conversations about the British Empire with Dr. Veraswami and inane (European) club chatter; Ma Hla May and Elizabeth Lackersteen; native rioting and colonial hunting. Flory's relationship with Dr. Veraswami is based on mutual friendship and cultured conversation about the British Empire, and the rights and wrongs of colonial rule in Burma. Flory understands the importation of the latest devices of modern civilization as the introduction of mass cultural noise and the subsequent ruin of Burmese culture and land. In its place he hears "villa after villa, with all the gramophones playing the same tune. And all the forests shaved flat—chewed into wood-pulp for the *News of the World*, or sawn up into gramophone cases" (40). The gramophone represents the homogeneity ("all playing the same tune") of the British that threatens authentic Burmese culture, a vibrancy that would be flattened much as the landscape by the incursions of foreign media and technology. Destroying natural landscape in order to colonize the Burmese mind is anathema to Flory's sense of right and wrong. The doctor, however, sees the same imperial design as civilizing the "the horrible sloth of the Oriental" (40), whom he elsewhere describes as "dirty, ignorant savages" and "barbarous cattle" (138). Hence, each man views his own culture with disdain for its lack of cultural refinement, but views

the other culture with reverence. These cultural conversations are bolstered with references to Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, Stevenson, Emerson, Carlyle, and Milton.

But this conversation is interrupted by a “desolate wailing noise outside” (41) of Old Mattu, the Hindu *durwan* who looks after the European church, begging for money. Veraswami uses him as an example of the East’s degeneracy in comparison to the benevolence of the West, not recognizing the irony that the church is unable to provide him with basic sustenance he needs, forcing him to beg. When the topic of Dr. Veraswami’s recent conflict with that “crocodile” (47) U Po Kyin, a corrupt magistrate, arises, the doctor intimates that prestigious Club membership, which Flory could do much in the way of procuring him, would protect him: “In the Club, practically he *iss* a European. No calumny can touch him. A Club member *iss* sacrosanct” (45). Flory knows he can procure the doctor with a membership, but not without a considerable “row” with several of its racist, vituperative members, something he knew “he could not face” (45). Cultural conversation seeks political progress, but Flory cannot withstand the banter of disagreement that secures it.

The European Club is unbearable to Flory because of the idle noise generated by its members, “silly clattering chatter about nothing” (105). Because the members often speak idly, without purpose, they only serve to hinder political progress in Burma. Flory is worn thin by their Club chatter: “Dull boozing witless porkers” he thought them, who repeat the same “evil-minded drivel” year after year, fed by “whisky, *Blackwood’s*, and the ‘Bonzo’ pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are a part of it” (32). One of its members does break rank and lobbies the rest to reverse its long-standing policy and accept an “Oriental member” (21). Ellis, the most offensive of the Club’s members

whom the narrator describes as “one of those Englishmen—common, unfortunately—who should never be allowed to set foot in the East” (23), objects with considerable invective: ““Dear Dr Veraswami, for instance. Dr Very-slimy, I call him. That would be a treat, wouldn’t it? Little pot-bellied niggers breathing garlic in your face over the bridge-table”” (22). Ellis, in a mood, even berates the butler for speaking perfectly good English at the Club (25), which suggests that language in addition to space marks distinction and superiority. The contrast between the cultured conversation of the Burmese doctor and the inanity and racism of Club chatter is one of many that illustrate the contradictions of British colonialism. Even Elizabeth Lackersteen, whom Flory falls in love with and believes “different from that herd of fools at the Club” (96), is in fact as bad as Ellis in her ill-appreciation of Burmese culture. Following several attempts to entertain Elizabeth with native spectacle, Flory realizes that only the banality of “Club-chatter” (127) would soothe her: “It was as though there had been a spell upon them that made all their conversation lapse into banality; gramophone records, dogs, tennis racquets—all that desolating Club-chatter. She seemed not to *want* to talk of anything but that” (111).<sup>10</sup> Still resolved to marry her, Flory’s exploitation of Burmese women, of gendered divisions of Empire, return to haunt him when it is discovered to Elizabeth that Flory is ““keeping a Burmese woman”” (186).

Burmese women, when no longer in the service of their colonial masters, are not only expected to be kept “invisible” (Kerr 249), but also silent. Flory’s vision following

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<sup>10</sup> The Burmese have a particular cultural relationship to noise, but often Flory attributes more meaning than is necessary. For example, the “shriek” of the bullock-cart wheels elicits the following comment from the narrator: “The Burmese bullock-cart drivers seldom grease their axles, probably because they believe that the screaming keeps away evil spirits, though when questioned they will say that it is because they are too poor to buy grease” (56). The “probably” interjection destabilizes omniscience: the Burmese, ultimately, remain beyond the scope of the narrative to contain.



the realization of Mrs Lackersteen's indiscretion recalls his own history of all the women he had "dirtied himself" with over the years, a procession of silent ghosts: "For a moment it seemed to him that an endless procession of Burmese women, a regiment of ghosts, were marching past him in the moonlight" (186). But Ma Hla May will not oblige this silent record. When Flory turns her out, she is reduced to a "screaming hag of the bazaar" (258); noise and ruckus are all Ma Hla May has left. Unable to return to her village and family after being a "*bo-kadam*, a white man's wife" (145), Ma Hla May can only create clamour in the hope of stirring Flory to keep her, at least financially: "Suddenly she burst into a furious tirade. Her voice had risen to the hysterical graceless scream of the bazaar women when they quarrel" (145). Burmese women, according to the narrator, are known for their quarrelsome noise. Noise becomes her only way to avoid being discarded by the Empire, something that reaches riotous proportions. The only thing that will silence the incessant noise of wronged Burma is the gun shot.

Sickened at times by his complicity in the colonial racket, Flory's self-hatred finds an outlet in shooting. The logic of colonialism demands violence. That night, in addition to the restless thoughts in his head, Flory is kept awake by a pack of dogs: "One dog had taken a dislike to Flory's house, and had settled down to bay at it systematically. Sitting on its bottom fifty yards from the gate, it let out sharp, angry yelps, one to half a minute, as regularly as a clock. It would keep this up for two or three hours, until the cocks began crowing" (59). In a sense, the unrest in Flory's mind finds its acoustic equivalent in the howling dog. After initially losing his nerve, he shoots at the pariah, but misses, and the dog merely moves out of range. Flory is aware of injustice, but unable to balance them. Flory's degrading sense of self also finds its reflection in his "ever bitterer hatred

of the atmosphere of imperialism in which he lived,” having grasped the “truth about the English and their Empire. The Indian Empire is a despotism—benevolent, no doubt, but still a despotism with theft as its final object” (65). Rather than face his complicity and alter his role in Empire, he contributes to the colonial racket by resorting to violence.

Ellis’s rash hand spurs the Burmese to riot, the noise of which threatens to overwhelm the indelicate balance of power. There is a fantasy of native justice, of rebellion that exacts a return for the price paid in subjection. But the fantasy can also be colonialist, too. Ellis had hoped for a “real rebellion” so that it could be quelled with severe force: “Lovely, sanguinary images moved through his mind. Shrieking mounds of natives, soldiers slaughtering them. Shoot them, ride them down, horses’ hooves trample their guts out, whips cut their faces in slices!” (229). With such images of hatred and violence swimming in his head, Ellis is accosted and mocked by a group of boys; he lashes out, and one of the boys is blinded. Though U Po Kyin had schemed to be the “*agent provocateur*” (132) of a riot he could then quell for acclaim, it is Ellis’s actions that bring the normal Club card game to an end with a “heavy thump” on the roof (232). With a “much louder bang,” the inhabitants and their Club chatter are rendered silent: “There was a deep, murmurous, dangerous sound outside, like the humming of an angry giant” (232). The mob arrives. When the Club members refuse to send Ellis out, the crowd responds with a “thunderous roar” as the first volley of stones hit the roof (234). The noise of the mob is overwhelming: “There were no gaps in the noise now, and the Burmans seemed to be pouring into the compound by the hundreds. The din swelled suddenly to such a volume that no one could make himself heard except by shouting” (234-35).

The riot is figured in metaphors of water—tides, flows, currents—forces of nature that do not actually have a will to guide them. Flory, sent out to enlist the aid of the police and initially “dazed by the noise,” wades into the mob “with an almost dreamlike feeling, so absurd and unreal was the situation,” unsure “whether he was fighting for his life, or merely pushing his way through the crowd” (236, 238-39). Flory locates the authorities and orders them to fire a volley over the rioters’ heads. Noise erupts as a demand for decency, which the Empire cannot by virtue of its project accommodate. Violence breaks out from the instability and underlying hatreds that serve to perpetuate the colonial way; nothing good comes of this. As with the shooting of a leopard and an elephant in Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant,” a sacrifice is needed to save face. Flory’s birthmark fades, but it does not disappear in death. Flory’s demise captures, according to Kerr, the “unnatural history of colonialism” in which “gestures of violent possession and control are self-defeating because they only serve to alienate their performers both from Burmese nature and from themselves” (Kerr 254). Anthony Stewart suggests that while *Burmese Days* is about the “corrupting effects on both colonizer and colonized,” Orwell’s subsequent novel turns its attention from the systematic “inequities inherent in capitalism” to the individual, “petty money problems of one disaffected young man” (Stewart 70).

In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), Orwell puts a hopeless critique of capitalism in the incapable mouth of a struggling poet who has a knack for writing advertisement jingles, Gordon Comstock. Gordon’s apocalyptic interpretation of advertising posters as indicative of cultural entropy indicts the modern world for mixing everything up with everything else. Poetry and advertising are increasingly mixed up with one another in the

novel, suggesting that minority culture is as interested (as opposed to its supposed disinterestedness) in packaging the quotidian in memorable phrases as mass culture is. Comstock believes his sinking lower-middle-class existence and “Social failure, artistic failure, sexual failure” (78) all come as a result of the degradations of the “money-stink” (14). Gordon’s favourite subject was “the futility, the bloodiness, the deathliness of modern life” (83), and he wanted “money-civilisation blown to hell by bombs” (84). Looking at an ad across the street, Comstock thinks that one cannot look at it “without thinking of French letters and machine guns” (85). Soon, he believes, a great big noise will finish it off. When Gordon sees a new advertisement with the “Bovex Ballad,” his sense of impending doom surges up again: “Yes, war is coming soon. You can’t doubt it when you see the Bovex ads. The electric drills in our streets presage the rattle of the machine guns. Only a little while before the aeroplanes come. Zoom-bang! A few tons of T.N.T. to send our civilisation back to hell where it belongs” (230). Civilization has progressed beyond usefulness. Noise is augury of demise.

Like Flory, Comstock contributes to the racket but, as Stewart suggests, he is able to “accept the value of decency in his treatment of those around him” (Stewart 70), something Flory does not. *Burmese Days* ends a “tragedy,” while *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is a “comedy, complete with a marriage at its conclusion” (70). While many critics take Comstock’s return to the New Albion Publicity Company and renouncement of his war on money-capitalism as resolutely defeatist, others find deepened values. Breton argues that “Gordon successfully changes himself and his relationship to the world, gleaning decency and nobility where decency and nobility had been absent” (202). He cites Eagleton’s assessment of Gordon’s transformation such that “the novel finally perceives

the humanity which remains at the heart of capitalism” (*Exiles* 99) as only “slightly inaccurate” (Breton 202): “Orwell did not believe the working class (the proles of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, for example) or the lower-middle class (men like George Bowling or Gordon Comstock) could or would change the world” (202).

Orwell’s final novel of the 1930s, *Coming Up for Air* (1939), also depicts a character unfit for the modern world, yet nonetheless resilient, who entertains apocalyptic fantasies as a result of the clatter and din all around him.<sup>11</sup> George Bowling’s life is noisy and, he feels, closing in on him. Bowling’s house resembles all the others on Ellesmere Road, and with two kids making a “noise like a herd of buffaloes” (6) he does not have a moment’s peace to think or go about his daily business. Bowling wonders how long peace will remain in the streets in England and sees the rows upon rows of identical homes as a “great big bulls-eye” to enemy bombers, imagining a quiet morning when suddenly “zoom, whizz, plonk! Houses going up into the air, bloomers soaked with blood, canary singing on above the corpses” (21). Bowling’s vision of the future, shaped by fear, is apocalyptic, and he thinks of his fellow Englishers as walking corpses oblivious to the “engines roaring and the horns tooting. Enough noise to waken the dead, but not to waken this lot” (25). Bowling sees cultural entropy as a factor that paves the way for the coming war. Standardization in a streamlined world full of radios and gramophones will end, in his mind, in a protracted war and totalitarian future: “A sort of

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Davison’s “A Note on the Text” suggests that Orwell wrote it while on retreat in Marrakesh between September 1938 and March 1939. Following the war, just before Warburg reprinted the novel in 1948, Orwell wrote to Julian Symons about the book nearly becoming a casualty of war, uncannily mirroring the apocalyptic fantasy entertained and then forgotten in the narrative: “I thought it worth reprinting because it was rather killed by the outbreak of war and then blitzed out of existence, so thoroughly that in order to get a copy from which to reset it we had to steal one from a public library” (qtd. in *CUA* v). Orwell also wrote to Roger Senhouse that the book had no semicolons in it because he had decided it was an “unnecessary stop” (qtd. in *CUA* vi), though Davison has pointed to three.

propaganda floating round, mixed up with the noise of the radio, to the effect that food doesn't matter, comfort doesn't matter, nothing matters except slickness and shininess and streamlining. Everything's streamlined nowadays, even the bullet Hitler's keeping for you" (22). The undercurrent of modern civilization is mass production, and that extends from food to armaments; but the menace remains specific: Hitler is gunning for you. Modern practices are heading the way of European fascism, or are at least paving the way for it. Moreover, the ideology of the new streamlined product is "mixed up with the noise of the radio," such that the prevalence of the wireless becomes an undifferentiated background to everything.

In contrast to modern dissolution, Bowling posits a pastoral idyll based on his Edwardian childhood. As a place, the past is free from the noises of modern civilization, complete with natural metaphors. His nostalgic reminiscence of childhood contrasts with the atmosphere of dread that he identifies in the modern suburb: "It's a kind of strong, rank feeling, a feeling of knowing everything and fearing nothing, and it's all bound up with breaking rules and killing things" (66). War changes everything. War knocked the permanence out of things; it brings bombs big enough and left in its wake noises loud enough to alter, irrevocably, ways of life. Even as a soldier during the First World War, he found time to sneak "away from the noise and the stink and the uniforms and the officers and the saluting and the sergeant's voice" to a pool under the poplar trees (85). Pre-war Lower Binfield stands synecdochally for England "before the slumps and before the dole," when the "world was big enough for everyone" (100). The war changed those things, fractured the permanence of enduring ways of life. Bowling wounded during the war in 1916, experiences this first hand. Describing the shell that was after him, Bowling

says, “There was the usual zwee-e-e-e! and the BOOM! in a field somewhere over to the right. I think it was the third shell that got me. I know as soon as I heard it coming that it had my name written on it. They say you always know. It didn’t say what an ordinary shell says. It said ‘I’m after you, you b——, *you*, you b——, YOU!’—all this in the space of about three seconds. And the last YOU was the explosion” (113-14). For the moment, at least, the shell appropriates Bowling’s narrative and assumes the first-person pronoun, relegating him to the second-person and suddenly the object of discourse, no longer its principal subject. War subjugates subjectivity. The “I” and “You” merge in the blast of impact, the war leaving behind it a “sense of disbelieving in everything” (128).

Still reeling from his day of deep thoughts about the coming war, George accompanies his wife Hilda to her Left Book Club meeting on “The Menace of Fascism” (151). Bowling describes the lecturer’s voice as a “kind of burr-burr-burr, with now and again a phrase that stuck out” to catch his attention: “You know the line of talk,” he intimates to the reader after citing a host of short phrases and slogans (153). These narrative asides to the reader reinforce familiarity that renders his paranoia less paranoid. They create complicity. Moreover, they heighten the recorded quality of the gramophonic speaker. “Just like a gramophone,” Bowling continues, the lecturer shoots out slogan after slogan: “Turn the handle, press the button and it starts. Democracy, Fascism, Democracy” (153). The comparison indicts the circularity and predictability of political discourse, a prepackaged product that peddles hatred. Marvelling at this “queer trade, anti-Fascism,” George recognizes that the man is “stirring up hatred,” and meaning it: “Perhaps even his dreams are slogans” (153, 154). George admits he “stopped listening to the actual words of the lecture,” shutting his eyes and listening

instead merely to the man's voice, a "human barrel-organ shooting propaganda at you by the hour. The same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate. Let's all get together and have a good hate. Over and over" (156). Listening to political oration as one would listen to entertainment institutes propaganda at the level of the voice, and not just voiced content. Tone of voice indicates intention. According to Dentith, Orwell's interest in demotic speech fed his critique of the "language of 'official' politics, government information, newspaper editorials and left-wing political parties for their common remoteness from the language of ordinary spoken English" (212). In "Propaganda and Demotic Speech," Orwell suggests a "genuinely democratic government" that wishes to inform people of all that matters "will need the mechanisms for doing so, of which the first are the right words, the right tone of voice" (*CEJL*, III, 168). In Orwell's vision of totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, voice is crucial.

Hardly a mere voice-box spewing pre-recorded ideological sound-bites, Porteous, George's old school-master friend, embodies the stereotypical Oxford don figure as a foil to the gramophonic Left Book Club lecturer. The two lecturers are foils for the forces of politics and culture that dominate 1930s discourse. As George puts it, "if the local Left Book Club branch represents Progress, old Porteous stands for Culture" (161). Both are held up for warning and ridicule as Orwell plays out two recognizable positions in the late 1930s. Opposed to the noise of the wireless age but deaf to the threatening notes of contemporary politics, Porteous is the "Oxfordy" bookish type who gives off the air that nothing much matters outside of "books and poetry and Greek statues" (162). Though Porteous does not issue orthodox political opinions as the lecturer does, George derives a similar listening pleasure in Porteous's voice that he would from a



gramophone record: "I'm part of the modern world myself, but I like to hear him talk," George insists, for "while you listen you aren't in the same world as trams and gas bills and insurance companies"—you escape that somehow, just by listening to him talk (164). George listens less to what the man says than to his voice, as he did with the Left Book Club orator, which in Porteous's case is identified with culture and thus rather "too peaceful, too Oxfordy" to disturb (165). Porteous is a man of the past, a "ghost," Bowling concludes, one incapable of recognizing and facing the danger borne in the "new kind of men from eastern Europe, the streamlined men who think in slogans and talk in bullets" (168-69). The voice of the machine gun is hard to argue with without one of your own.

To escape the incessant noise of modern suburban life, Bowling decides to return to Lower Binfield, the place of his childhood. Michael Levenson reads Bowling as "Orwell's Jonah"; hemmed in on every side, "Bowling neither comprehends the political world nor tries to change it. He merely wants to rediscover the ground of happiness" (Levenson 72). George revels in the idea of escaping the noise of the modern world and the "Everlasting din of buses, bombs, radios, telephone bells" (177), and "listening to the quietness!" (176). Countless gramophones interrupt this idyll as Bowling returns to his favourite fishing hole—fishing is the opposite of war—only to discover it overrun. While the din that has invaded George's pastoral childhood confirms his worst fears that war is coming, he could not be prepared for the "noise like the Day of Judgment" (223). An accidental bombing occurs as bombers run practice flights overhead, but no one realizes that it is friendly fire until after the fact. Though not the outbreak of war, the bomb shoves George up against the real. Bowling describes the fleet of bombers "zooming"

and “whizzing” overhead, then the unmistakable “whistle of a bomb” as the blast brings a ton of bricks all around him: “BOOM—BRRRRR!” (232). Because bombs bring the trauma of experience beyond words, George’s description graduates from the onomatopoeic to the outright phonetic. Believing it to be that fleet of bombers he expected from Hitler, George marvels at the bomb itself, its psychological and physical impacts, and particularly how it sounded. “What does it sound like,” he muses, “It’s hard to say, because what you hear is mixed up with what you’re frightened of” (233). Though the bomb that fell was a mistake, it renders material in its noise and destruction all that George has till this point held in conscious, fearful abeyance. Noise signals the inevitability of cataclysm. “War is coming,” he predicts: “*It’s all going to happen*” (238).

Novels, according to Michael Levenson, “sustain a counter-world, a space apart” (74). George Bowling does little with his deepening realization of impending war and destruction, for upon his return to his middle-class suburban life he is forced to resign himself to its cloistered existence. Like Bowling, Orwell sees capitalism, fascism, Empire, and advertising as “violent eruptions blocking the restoration of the ‘stream of life.’” Bowling has nothing to do but to accept his condition, but if he can do that with his average sensual humanity, then until he falls silent, he will remind us of us” (Levenson 74). Noise, then, marks the individual’s engagement with the social and political real in Orwell’s works of documentary and psychological realism in the 1930s. Sometimes this engagement is disjointed and corrosive, while at other times it crosses boundaries of class and nation. Language, technology, and power are inflected with noise. Orwell documents and imagines ways of listening to these noises as both harbingers of change and warnings of dire consequences to come.

## Chapter Six: The Politics of Noise: *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

“I did not enter into silence; silence captured me.” ~ Ezra Pound (1966)

George Orwell begins his wartime essay, “The Lion and the Unicorn” (1941), on a stark note: “As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me” (*Essays* 138). Once again a target, Orwell inscribes the blitz into the moment of writing. The confusions and crises of the 1930s have been replaced by the stark reality of the 1940s; “highly civilized human beings,” not mindless machines or faceless fascists, storm overhead, as he predicted they would in *Homage to Catalonia*. As his title indicates, Orwell is writing as much about the state as he is about the state of writing. The second part of the essay inscribes more noise: “I began this book to the tune of German bombs, and I begin the second chapter in the added racket of the barrage. The yellow gun-flashes are lighting the sky, the splinters are rattling on the housetops, and London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down” (*Essays* 159). Making meaning out of the violent racket, Orwell turns the blitz into a worn-out nursery rhyme, echoing T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (426). The nursery rhyme, while filtering the intense trauma of war, pits the fantastical against the real. Incorporating elements of both fantasy and realism, Orwell represents the politics of noise in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Despite their formal differences, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* imagine similar totalitarianisms: a grim and starkly realist portrayal of the future on the one hand, and a sanitary political fable on the other. They share noise as acoustic signatures and tropes. Both novels describe the erosion of thought by evil strategies of noise. Structures of power are rooted in equivocation, contradiction, betrayal, and hypocrisy. Noise demarcates the insidiousness of propaganda and the epistemological confusions of total

politics. In addition to the metaphoric noise that reverberates throughout the slogan-world of Big Brother, noise emanates in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from blaring telescreens, shouting Party members, and orthodox duckspeakers, which is contrasted with church bells and nursery rhymes as sounds of hope. The screech of the telescreen (the modernist technology par excellence) is the keynote in Big Brother's ideological symphony, around which all other noises and dins are orchestrated. While the "proles" (working classes) still embody a clamour that signifies revolution in Winston's mind, the Party system indoctrinates Inner and Outer (upper and middle class) members via noise in a much more sophisticated and disturbing way. Noise initially betokens the potency of the revolution in *Animal Farm* but later signals the discord that creeps into the ideals of Animalism and the actual governance of the farm. Bleating sheep, growling dogs, and political clap-trap propagandize and intimidate the animals into dutiful obedience to Napoleon and his dictatorial pigocracy. The result is weakened opposition and mindless obedience: the narrator's refrain "it was noticed" marks the animal's passivity while Winston and Julia must use "low expressionless voice[s]" (119). Orthodoxy dictates that the correct order of things is not just the only way, but the best way of life. Propaganda bypasses consciousness and reduces the individual to a function in the state apparatus, a sheep bleating or a voice-box spewing the same slogan.

Formal changes correspond with political effects in Orwell's narratives of the 1940s. Orwell shifts emphasis from intimate first-person narration in the 1930s to a plainly objective third-person narration in both novels of the 1940s, moving from the ironic to the darkly satirical. In "Why I Write" (1946), he suggests that the writer does best to keep personality out of writing: "Good prose is like a window pane. [...] And

looking back through my work, I see that it is invariably where I lacked a *political* purpose that I wrote lifeless books and was betrayed into purple passages, sentences without meaning, decorative adjectives and humbug generally” (*Essays* 7). Politics, in other words, reinvigorate his writing. Through satire and the incorporation of noise into text, Orwell illustrates a kind of political “clairaudience”; not in the sense of hearing beyond the sense of hearing, but rather as R. Murray Schafer means it, literally “clear hearing” (Schafer 272). Hearing through the muddle of partisan politics is Orwell’s rhetorical position in *Homage to Catalonia*, and his satires of the 1940s continue to emphasize noise as a measure of political infidelity.

Language and politics are indissoluble in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In “Politics and the English Language” (1946), Orwell argues that the English language is declining and that the process is not “natural” (*Essays* 348). The causes are many, but politics play a considerable role in semantic obfuscation. Language deteriorates under dictatorship. When orthodoxy employs language as nothing more than an instrument to articulate political conformity, “insincerity,” the “great enemy of clear language,” bubbles into the “gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims” (357). Orwell’s critique of the confluence of orthodoxy, propaganda, and language is precisely that the individual no longer thinks and acts like an individual, but as a “dummy” or a “machine,” “mechanically repeating the familiar phrases” (356). Like a gramophone blaring a record, or a ventriloquist’s manikin mouthing words, a speaker enters into a “reduced state of consciousness” quite “favourable to political conformity” when he ceases to join his will to language: “The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself” (356). Thought can

corrupt language, but “language can also corrupt thought” (357). Orwell shares the modernist contention that the subject emerges in language.

These novels deepen Orwell’s engagement with noise because language and propaganda move to the forefront of the narrative. Propaganda employs noise as a chief tactic in resolving contradiction: opposition is shouted down and unorthodox thoughts are routed from the mind. In “Looking Back on the Spanish War” (1942), written in the middle of the Second World War, Orwell aligns the power of bombs with the power of words, both descending from on high, and points to the latter as the more fearful: “If the Leader says of such and such an event, ‘It never happened’—well, it never happened. If he says that two and two are five—well, two and two are five. This prospect frightens me much more than bombs—and after our experiences of the last few years that is not a frivolous statement” (*Essays* 225). War, a time of extremes, makes people more susceptible to propaganda. In *Animal Farm*, the chorus of sheep who bleat the fundamental maxim of Animalism negate opposition. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Goldstein’s voice is indistinguishable from a sheep’s bleat, while crowds of Party members shout vitriol at the shrill telescreen during the Two Minutes Hate. He is critical of the indistinguishable mixing of language and ideology, or voice and ventriloquism, that leads to political conformity. Propaganda can turn one into an instrument for the will of another, a ventriloquist’s dummy or a mindless gramophone; contemporary technologies further mask this effect.

Technology continues to be demonized by Orwell in the 1940s, particularly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where it is integral to the matrix of domination. Orwell’s representation of the noisy, intrusive, and mindless effects of the radio and gramophone

in the 1930s is intensified exponentially in the telescreen, which adds surveillance to the evils of broadcasting. Hitler's boast that the loudspeaker proved essential to conquering Germany is manifested in Big Brother's reliance on the telescreen to subdue Oceania. The culture industry is designed to entertain the proles and to keep them in check, pacified with versions of the cheap, at times noisy, palliatives of the kind Orwell bemoans in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Technology is less prevalent in *Animal Farm*, but the windmill symbolizes faith in industry and technological advance as a mockery of the Stalin-era modernization projects. The wireless, telephone, and other domestic technologies provide an ironic commentary on the unfitness of the pigs' rule and their betrayal of the animal revolution.

As politics and ideology break down into merely orthodox statements replayed by human gramophones, listening takes on a critical element that questions the influence of radio and the wireless. Moreover, in the 1940's, Orwell's own work in radio broadcasting cued him to the deeper resonances of the voice and medium. Not only a broadcasting service, the BBC was an information-gathering service during the war as well. Douglas Kerr points out that "the ears if not the eyes of the BBC were everywhere" ("Broadcasts" 480). Thanks to the painstaking work of the Monitoring Service, which transcribed broadcasts from around the world, "Orwell was one of the few writers in England to have actually followed the pro-fascist broadcasts Ezra Pound made in Italy," in addition to other propaganda worldwide (480). The voice of the new streamlined man, imagined in *Coming Up for Air* and realized by the duckspeaker in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is harsh, gabbling, and ill-omened. Despite the intensified noises of the political, Orwell's satires suggest that propaganda and totalitarian power make those noises all the more

difficult to hear.

### Noise and Propaganda in *Animal Farm*

Orwell started *Animal Farm* late in 1943 when he left the Eastern Service (Indian section) of the BBC. As a Talks Assistant and Talks Producer, he had to defend, as Douglas Kerr puts it, “the Raj against the Reich” (“Picture” 44). Orwell witnessed the dark side of propaganda in Spain; he subsequently warned his Indian listeners that though their borders were safe, they had been invaded by words: “To the Axis powers, propaganda is an actual weapon, like guns or bombs, and to learn how to discount it is as important as taking cover during an air raid” (qtd. in Kerr, “Broadcasts” 481). Discerning truth from lies is a matter of self-preservation as well as to the good of the nation. Censorship, which Orwell dealt with constantly during his time at the BBC, prevented publication of *Animal Farm* until 1945 when Fredric Warburg took it on. Warburg draws a link between the political climate of the war years and *Animal Farm*, published 11 days after the atomic bomb was dropped: “Though the A-bomb was dropped on Japan, it was doubtless considered as a warning to the U.S.S.R. A-bomb and A-farm thus had an identical target” (*Authors* 57).

*Animal Farm* is about power. An allegory of Stalin’s betrayal of the Russian Revolution, *Animal Farm* represents noise and propaganda as indispensable tools of power.<sup>1</sup> By placing the powers of speech in the mouths of farmyard animals, Orwell turns otherwise unintelligible gabble into an astute commentary on morality, politics, and

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<sup>1</sup> Aesop’s Fables provided material for Soviet propaganda posters in the Second World War during Operation Barbarossa, which depicted the German wolf in sheep’s clothing.  
(<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Aesop's-Fables>)



betrayal. Over the course of the narrative, the original commandments of Animalism are gradually transformed—a fabulist element used ironically—into the solitary non-egalitarian commandment of the dictator. Squealer’s propaganda resolves apparent contradictions and erases any doubts as to the legitimacy of Napoleon’s dictatorship and the pigocracy. Following the exile of Snowball and massacre of dissenters amidst show trials and false confessions, Napoleon consolidates his power through political intimidation and persecution. This betrayal of the revolution and corruption of Animal Farm is kept hidden from view until the final scene, when a ruckus in the farmhouse signals the irrefutable truth.

An “uproar” (14) in the farm buildings marks the beginning of the revolutionary period and defines the shape of things to come. The novel begins with a “stirring and a fluttering all through the farm buildings,” after Mr. Jones, the proprietor of Manor Farm, turns in for the night (5). Old Major, the prized boar, reveals his dream of revolution, his speech laying the cause of animal “misery and slavery” (8) squarely at the foot of Man. Major identifies Man as the only creature who consumes all of the animals’ labour without producing any of his own, and resolves that rebellion is the only solution: “All men are enemies. All animals are comrades” (11). The assessment of stark injustice in the socio-economic balance is classic Marxist-communism. The animals are the underclass rebelling against nonproductive man and reclaiming ownership of their labour, land, and right to self-determination. The principles behind the revolt are egalitarian and socialist: to promote equality amongst the animals. Laying the groundwork for a new code of ethics after the rebellion, Major emphasizes that the animals must not imitate man or “adopt his vices. No animal must ever live in a house,

or sleep in a bed, or wear clothes, or drink alcohol, or smoke tobacco, or touch money, or engage in trade. All the habits of Man are evil. And, above all, no animal must ever tyrannize over his own kind. Weak or strong, clever or simple, we are all brothers. No animal must ever kill any other animal. All animals are equal” (12). The code of ethics is precise in its measured tones and prohibitions, if somewhat biblical in its prohibitions. Despite Man’s standing on two feet, it is the animals, according to Major’s dictum, who must be morally upstanding.

Animalism, the set of commandments based upon Major’s inaugural principles of the revolution, captures the spirit of both religious doctrine and political constitution. Following the rebellion, the expulsion of Jones, and the death of Major, the Seven Commandments are painted on the barn wall, with a single spelling error and one of the s’s “the wrong way round” (23). The minor flaws are only minor, but they indicate the imperfections inherent in language and points of access for bending it. Writing is a public event and social declaration; writing on the wall hails the passerby with commands, injunctions, entreaties, and accusations. Orwell saw his share of graffiti in Spain and noted how the posters shouted at him in Barcelona, admonishing him for his affiliations where he was once welcomed. The Seven Commandments of Animalism should be enduring and firm, but almost immediately they undergo change. The far wall of the barn becomes a visual transmigration of values as power shifts on the farm. Snowball summarizes the seven principles into a single maxim, identifying man’s hand as the distinguishing mark of his “mischief,” so that: “FOUR LEGS GOOD, TWO LEGS BAD, was inscribed on the end wall of the barn, above the Seven Commandments and in bigger letters” (31). The dim-witted sheep, representing the masses, take a great liking

to the maxim, and bleat it “for hours on end, never growing tired of it” (31).

One of Orwell’s chief points in his writing is that, as Ian Slater puts it, “hypocrisy is hidden in language” (Slater 65). With the acquisition of power comes distinction. When the pigs revel in their privilege, Squealer, the resident propagandist, employs “verbal camouflage” (Slater 65) to disguise their superiority and self-interest. The pigs are discovered to be taking milk and apples, at which “the other animals murmured” (32). Squealer is sent to quell the uneasiness and suspicion, and suggests the effective running of the farm depends on the “brain-workers” (the pigs), for if the farm were to fail, “Jones would come back!” (32, 33). “It is for *your* sake,” he assures them, “that we drink that milk and eat those apples” (32). Squealer’s name suits his purpose; he manipulates the animals’ fears, takes charge of the flow of information, and guides belief on the farm. Taking advantage of the animal’s bias for their own kind, he pits the actions of the pigs against that of Jones: which one is better? Propaganda, as Orwell understands it, reveals the obvious choice. According to Jacques Ellul, “Propaganda dissolves contradictions and restores to man a unitary world in which the demands are in accord with the facts” (Ellul 159). Propaganda relieves individuals of doubt and groups of contradictions. Not only is the present organization the only one (the pigs are the cleverest animals) but also the best one (no one wants Mr. Jones back). Absorption without discussion reduces the potential of another “uproar” from the animals at the privileged behaviour of the pigs. Douglas Kerr points out the propaganda is “the engineering of point of view” (“Picture” 50), so that everything is as it should be.

Napoleon achieves power through noise and violence. Given the opportunity to sway the animals with argument on the proposed windmill, Napoleon spoke briefly and

“quietly” against it, and “seemed almost indifferent to the effect he produced” (47).

Snowball, however, “sprang to his feet, and shouting down the sheep, who had begun bleating again, broke into a passionate appeal in favour of the windmill” (47). Following Snowball’s eloquent argument, Napoleon “stood up and, casting a peculiar sidelong look at Snowball, uttered a high-pitched whimper of a kind no one had ever heard him utter before” (47). At the whimper, “a terrible baying sound outside” (47) marks the emergence of the nine dogs, fiercely loyal to Napoleon; Snowball, suddenly pursued, barely escapes with his life. The dogs embody noise and force. The other animals in the barn, “[s]ilent and terrified,” observe how like the dogs are to Jones’s: “They kept close to Napoleon. It was noticed that they wagged their tails to him in the same way as the other dogs had been used to do to Mr Jones” (48). The passive construction—“It was noticed”—is repeated in the narrative (24, 28, 43, 58, 67, 71) to indicate the limits of the animals’ suspicion of perfidy. The passive leeches responsibility from the sentence. It was noticed, but no one *takes* notice.

Napoleon’s control over the farm is a dictatorship of noise. Growling dogs, bleating sheep, and a propagandizing Squealer are the chief manifestations of the noise needed to maintain power. Squealer, who “could turn black into white” (16), is the chief mouthpiece of the regime. He is responsible for quieting suspicion and quelling dissent among the animals. Whenever change is dictated by Napoleon that contradicts one of the collective resolutions, the meekest protest is “promptly silenced by a tremendous growling from the dogs,” and is followed with chorus of bleating sheep who drown consciousness with their mindless chants (57). The pattern is completed by Squealer’s subsequent explanations that “set the animals’ minds at rest” by tapping into their fears

of Jones or the scapegoat, Snowball (57). *Animal Farm* becomes an increasingly violent nightmare of show trials, executions, and manufactured consent.

While noise is a strategy of power, it is also a literary trope employed to call attention to the disjunction between levels of meaning. Propaganda and pageantry use noise to call attention to the surface habits of things as a means of disguising the reality underneath. Tipped by the satirist's pen, noise becomes a key rhetorical figure for calling this paradox into question. When the pigs parade from the farmhouse "all walking on their hind legs," a "tremendous baying of dogs and a shrill crowing from the black cockerel" signal Napoleon's entrance into the yard "majestically upright," replete with a "whip in his trotter" to perfect the strolling dictator (113). Ironically, while the pigs walk "majestically upright" they are morally "on all fours" for betraying the revolution. Before any of the animals can utter a note of protest, the spectacle is accompanied by the "tremendous bleating" of the sheep: "Four legs good, two legs *better!*" (114). The sheep, trained by Squealer, bleat until the "chance to utter any protest has passed" (114); but their mindless repetition of a considerably different phrase highlights the bankruptcy of the pigocracy. Noise accompanies pageantries of power, but also gestures to their inherent political infidelities.

Noise, propaganda, and force elicit consent at the expense of conscious choice and meaning. As Morris Dickstein notes, Orwell captures the "brazen," at times blatantly absurd nature of propaganda in the totalitarian state (142). The brash duping of the animals is especially evident when Benjamin reads out what was left of the Seven Commandments on the far wall of the barn towards the end of the novel: "ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN

OTHERS" (114). The principle hardly needs to be written, and its evidence harder to hide. Having gradually become conscious of the extent of the betrayal, the animals are no longer surprised to discover that the pigs had "bought themselves a wireless set, were arranging to install a telephone, and had taken out subscriptions to *John Bull*, *Tit-Bits*, and the *Daily Mirror*," and even began wearing clothes (115). Cultural rackets echo political ones.

Noise, moreover, signals the breakdown of power. The novel ends on what Orwell describes as a "loud note of discord" (*CEJL* III, 458).<sup>2</sup> The emergent coalition between Man and animal is marked by the "loud laughter and bursts of singing" (*AF* 117) emanating from the farmhouse where Pilkington and the other men carouse with Napoleon and the other pigs. The animals, looking in through the window, are horrified. At first the appearance of camaraderie is all the animals notice. Subsequently the animals gazing in see that "some strange thing was happening" to the faces of the pigs (120). An "uproar of voices" from the farmhouse calls the animals back to the window to confirm their suspicions of the pigs' duplicity and infidelity: "Yes, a violent quarrel was in progress. There were shoutings, furious denials" (120). Pilkington and Napoleon play the same ace of spades; like minds think, and cheat, alike. And they are more alike than just mind: "Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again, but already it was impossible to

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<sup>2</sup> In the preface he wrote in 1947 for the Ukrainian translation of the book, Orwell attempts to clarify his intentions in conclusion: "A number of readers may finish the book with the impression that it ends in the complete reconciliation of the pigs and the humans. That was not my intention; on the contrary I meant it to end on a loud note of discord, for I wrote it immediately after the Tehran Conference which everybody thought had established the best possible relations between the USSR and the West. I personally did not believe that such good relations would last long; and, as events have shown, I wasn't far wrong" (qtd. in Stewart 117).

say which was which" (120). The once tentative and passive constructions of "it was noticed" have been replaced in the end by the undeniable: "Yes," there is no longer passive doubt and suspicion of the ruling pigs becoming like the men they overthrew, corrupted by power. "No question, now," that this is indeed the case. Stylistically, Orwell's plain, objective, matter-of-fact narration enables the reader to gain a view on the final scene much as the other animals do. Elizabeth Bowen's prose style in *The Heat of the Day* echoes the noises and uncertainties of the blitz through a kind of syntactic stammer made up of awkward turns, jars, jingles, and semantic slips. Orwell, by contrast, presents an impeccably simple prose, plain and unobscure, like the fairy tales upon which *Animal Farm* is modelled, to ensure with crystal clarity the political moral. The absence of any "noisy" distracters enhances the resolution of the discordant note. As a result, Orwell turns the "window pane" of his prose (*Essays* 7) into a magnifying glass. Orwell's narrative style offers itself as an antidote to the confusions, lies, and discombobulating propaganda underwriting totalitarianism.

Noise, then, does not simply arise from below, but rather issues from above as a frightful injunction to submit. Orwell's infamous statement in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that "every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed" (*RWP* 146) reverberates in the conclusion of *Animal Farm*. Hannah Arendt argues in *On Revolution* that both liberals and Marxists entertain the idea that revolution will take them, somehow, beyond politics, a faulty promise. Orwell's critique in *Animal Farm* is simpler: revolution comes full circle. Revolution is not an ironic paradigm destined to reestablish the orders and structures of power once overthrown. The transition from the revolutionary, liberating noise of democratic

socialism to the repressive, indecent noise of totalitarianism, however, can be difficult to discern—which makes it all more imperative to hear.

Though *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* both imagine versions of the “totalitarian ideal of a frictionless monological discourse” (Kerr, “Broadcasts” 484), the later novel does so by focusing on the impact such a discourse has on the individual. The totalitarian ideal, according to Annette Federico, requires the elimination of the “random, imperfect, or useless, the very things that fall through the cracks of recorded history” because they “constitute alternatives to the logic of totalitarianism” (51). Personal histories become precarious narratives during the Second World War and its aftermath, because lives can be blasted in an instant and testimonies subsumed or obliterated by the official policy or history of a nation. Winston Smith’s is such a narrative, set in a distant future that resonates with the immediate past.

### **The Orthodoxy of Noise in *Nineteen Eighty-Four***

Emanating from the Second World War, deeply enmeshed in the emerging ideological conflicts of the Cold War, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* captures the torturous screech of politics through the transparent consciousness of its unremarkable hero, Winston Smith. The world depicted in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of perpetual war, perpetual surveillance, and the perpetual present. Erika Gottlieb points out that “the machinery of unceasing wars is an imposture” (“Demonic” 55) in the narrative, a collusion of the superpowers to maintain a grueling existence based on fear. The racket of unceasing war covers the contradiction that though Oceania is futuristic and boasts a complex technological bureaucracy, the world is, in many ways, backwards (Phelan 99).



*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a blitz novel. Not a novel *of* the blitz, like Henry Green's *Caught*, or *about* the blitz, like Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, but the atmosphere and relentless assault on consciousness is the same. In the blitz novel, bodies and minds are bombarded with admonishing, accusatory, harsh sounds articulated by human voices, sirens, radios, bombs, and rockets. Noise resonates throughout the text. To live through the blitz, as Bowen puts it, is to live among the "insidious echoless propriety of ruins" (*HOD* 100). The experience of wartime London infuses *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, though Bowen's notion of the permeability of the self finds a drastically negative representation in Orwell's novel. Together with the 20-30 rocket attacks a week in Airstrip One, Oceania's England, the telescreen recreates the atmosphere of perpetual air raid, and the paranoid, proleptic mind set of the war-city. Always described as emitting an "ear-splitting whistle" (*NEF* 33) and voices that penetrate the brain "like jagged splinters of glass" (106), the telescreen embodies the terror and anticipation of the air raid while the metaphors Orwell uses to describe its effect are common ones in literature of the blitz. The goal of Newspeak, the totalitarian language of the future, is to preserve this state of echoless ruin by reducing the occurrence of unorthodox thoughts and beliefs by eliminating the need for interpretation.

Language and propaganda vie with noise in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Harsh voices, shouting, screeching overwhelm consciousness so that critical discernment is obliterated. The Leavisite worry over the declining cultural idiom in the 1930s seems politically naïve when set beside Newspeak and the degrading commandments of Animalism. Newspeak structures political orthodoxy as a grammatical feature of language. Big Brother executes total political domination by means of total noise, a centrifugal force that reverberates

through all levels of private life so that the “few cubic centimetres” (29) within the skull are all that remain of individual will and self-determination. The screech of the telescreen is the keynote around which Big Brother orchestrates its systematic dissemination of noise and propaganda. Orwell maintains that the increasing din that fills out the modern soundscape is not a neutral part of the real, but ideologically inflected, politically determined, and socially informed. In a totalitarian society, this din negates the idealized space of vital, rational discourse denoted by the public sphere. Both the heroic (“Winston”) and the common (“Smith”) individual are rendered inconsequential when the power of the state is total. Language is neither a neutral medium nor a disinterested repository of meaning. Orthodoxy is everything in the hyper-centralized totalitarian state; while unorthodox sounds exist, such as the shouts and brouhaha emanating from the ranks of proles, they are rendered meaningless in the acoustic regimentation of Oceania. Telescreens are the medium of governance in Oceania, admonishing Party members to follow Big Brother’s way. Designed to keep all Party members in check by relentless propaganda and ceaseless surveillance, telescreens rend the inside out and force the outside in.

Consciousness is battered by the noise of the telescreen. The telescreen combines the technologies of telephony, radio, and television. An instrument that simultaneously transmits and receives sound and image, the telescreen creates the impression that even silence is regulated. Not only does “private life [come] to an end” (*NEF* 214) because of it, but independent thinking becomes unorthodox: 24-hour surveillance means being constantly “in the sound of official propaganda,” the message strictly one of obedience and uniformity (214). *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reconsiders the application of noise to

indoctrination. The telescreens are relentless in this propagandist pursuit, forming a kind of blitzkrieg of sound and information raining down on the ears of Party members, wherever they might be: “Day and night the telescreens bruised your ears with statistics,” proving that life had improved over the past 50 years (77). In all possible ways, this is propaganda at its worst: the “mediation of fact and the fabrication of history” (Keith Williams 163).

In the telescreen, acoustic unsettling is combined with panoptic surveillance. As Attali suggests, “Eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus” (Attali 7). Taken to extremes, the modern State can become a “gigantic, monopolizing noise emitter, and at the same time, a generalized eavesdropping device” (Attali 7). Noise, once associated solely with the lower classes, characterizes the middle-class experience of Party members in Oceania. Though Inner Party members have the distinct privilege to shut theirs off (*NEF* 175), Outer Party members cannot find relief. The submersion of the conscious mind into the unconscious recalls Huxley’s fears about the overwhelming nature of the “pre-fabricated din” flowing throughout the home by way of the wireless set. Orwell’s point, however, is distinctly political. Winston is still able to find refuge in silence—resistance, in fact—but only as one finds it in sleep: without consciousness.

Telescreens manipulate the body into a conduit of noise, capable of betraying the mind of its unorthodox thoughts through unexpected behaviour and gesticulation. When Winston discovers the photograph exonerating three alleged conspirators of counter-revolutionary offenses, he is immediately fearful of detection. Winston could control his

breathing and his facial expressions, sitting in plain view of the telescreen, the narrator explains, but “you could not control the beating of your heart, and the telescreen was quite delicate enough to pick it up” (82). The body becomes a potential enemy of the soul insofar as its noise or uncertain movements can betray an inner truth. All Party members become little brothers, as it were, because they practice the same method of control over their bodies, tuned to betrayal, that Big Brother does over them. Suspicion is a civic duty. Children are encouraged to spy on everyone, and, as Parsons explains to Winston, are even given “Ear trumpets for listening through keyholes” (66). In a disturbing way, the family is no longer gathered round the proverbial hearth, but rather the telescreen and its technology of surveillance.

Telescreens emit noises that produce visceral reactions. The Two Minutes Hate, a daily exercise in Party propaganda, begins with an intense noise, “a hideous, grinding screech, as of some monstrous machine running without oil,” which “burst from the big telescreen at the end of the room. It was a noise that set one’s teeth on edge and bristled the hair at the back of one’s neck. The Hate had started” (13). Noise irritates the body with unwanted vibrations. These reactions worsen, eliciting purely emotional responses from Winston, when the chief enemy of the Party, Emmanuel Goldstein, appears on the telescreen: “Winston’s diaphragm was constricted. He could never see the face of Goldstein without a painful mixture of emotions” (14). Goldstein’s voice is described as having a “sheeplike quality” (14), and he speaks in “rapid polysyllabic speech which was a parody of the habitual style of the orators of the Party” (15). The propaganda video, complete with marching armies and the “dull rhythmic” sound of tramping boots behind Goldstein’s “claptrap” and “bleating voice” (15), combines auditory and visual data to

inspire automatic reactions, not critical thoughts in its auditors. Noise, a dismissal of consciousness, engenders more noise, and within thirty seconds “uncontrollable exclamations of rage” broke out from the audience at the “object of hatred” (15).

Responding to the vilifying volume of the telescreen’s production, Party members grow increasingly agitated: “In its second minute the Hate rose to a frenzy,” until people were shouting down the “maddening bleating voice that came from the screen” (16). Noise demands a response, and that response is hatred—the noise of civilization.

With all pretences brought down by the telescreen, a “hideous ecstasy” like an “electric current” courses through everyone till each becomes a “grimacing, screaming lunatic” (16). Even Winston, otherwise a critical consciousness at one remove from the events he describes in his diary, unconsciously joins in the collective bruiting of Hate. Goldstein seemed to him “some sinister enchanter, capable by the mere power of his voice of wrecking the structure of civilisation” (17), as if the voice had the power to create and destroy realities. Orwell’s representation of Goldstein captures the importance of the political voice, over radio or loudspeaker, which comes like a wrecking ball at the walls of consciousness during this period. Sound becomes the focal point as it supplants content rather than conveys it; power is animated by the voice, the voice electrified by power. In Oceania, a world weaned on propaganda, the medium is the message.

Party members internalize the technology of the telescreen by becoming instruments of Big Brother’s political will. The telescreens and loudspeaker during Two Minutes Hate and Hate Week reduce Party members to mindless voice-boxes spewing the Party line. Winston’s wife, Katharine, is a telling example. According to Winston, she was the “most stupid, vulgar, empty mind that he had ever encountered,” the “human

sound-track' he nicknamed her" (69) because her only thoughts were Party slogans. Winston views women with deep disdain because of all the "rubbish" that is "dinned into them" at an early age (71). The Party idea of fanatic unity is gramophonic—"all thinking the same thoughts and shouting the same slogans" (77)—an image that recurs in Orwell's critique of contemporary, mass politics. "It is particularly the gramophone mind," Ian Slater writes, "listening to the same tune and the ready-made phrases that anaesthetize the brain, that Orwell warned us to guard against, lest our familiarity with the tune's rhythm and lyrics lull us into a dumb acceptance of our own brand of Newspeak" (246). Orwell's warning is extensive and not only to the underclass or foreign body that is subject to mass delusion, but all classes. In fact, as Jacques Ellul argues, "intellectuals are most easily reached by propaganda, particularly if it employs ambiguity" (113).

Party members are animated, spoken through, by Big Brother propaganda; as Patricia Rae suggests, "Big Brother is the great ventriloquist" (Rae 213). Big Brother is the ventriloquist par excellence because, although his image is everywhere, he never appears. As Steven Connor contends, the "god or tyrant" who wishes to ensure devout obedience never "discloses himself to the sight of his people, but manifests himself and his commands through the ear. Do we not call such a person a *dictator*? *Ex auditu fides*, as St Paul puts it in Romans 10:17—from hearing comes belief. The very word 'obedience' derives from the Latin *audire*" (Connor 23). The illusion of the thrown voice and of the invisible hand, however, also draws attention to the puppetry. Orwell satirizes mass politics through Big Brother's reductive measures of Party member intelligence. The combination of primitive leader worship and highly technological transmissions of

propaganda operates on a level that bypasses the critical faculties of consciousness. Witnessing the “slow, deep, rhythmical” “sub-human chanting of ‘B-B!’” among the audience during the Two Minutes Hate, Winston is filled with horror (18, 19). No longer even intelligent speech, the repetition of the basic fricatives is described as “a heavy, murmurous sound, somehow curiously savage, in the background of which one seemed to hear the stamp of naked feet and the throbbing of tom-toms” (18). The orgiastic hatred of Goldstein transforms into ritualized love for Big Brother, and the mass political rally begins to look more like a religious service, despite its primitive undertones. The deliberate confusion of registers of meaning happens between the conscious and the unconscious mind, so that this chanting sounds as a “sort of hymn to the wisdom and majesty of Big Brother, but still more it was an act of self-hypnosis, a deliberate drowning of consciousness by means of rhythmic noise” (18-19). Big Brother has perfected the demagoguery of hero worship and the religious connotations of the blind faith it demands, here induced by ritualized noise.

Big Brother’s propaganda campaign and political pageantry climax during Hate Week, a kind of jubilee of ill-will, in the second part of the novel. In addition to the volume and rhetorical bombast typical of the political speech, the oration during Hate Week reveals another kind of racket at the heart of Big Brother’s network of noise. Hate Week is a loud and boisterous homage to the theatrics of fascist statecraft, with all the “processions, the speeches, the shouting, the singing, the banners, the posters, the films, the waxworks, the rolling of drums and squealing of trumpets, the tramp of marching feet, the grinding of the caterpillars of tanks, the roar of massed planes, the booming of guns,” which boiled the crowd into a “delirium” of hatred against Eurasia (187). In the

middle of a speech—the booming voice of speaker “made metallic by the amplifiers” often “drowned by the wild beast-like roaring that rose uncontrollably from thousands of throats” (188)—after six days of collective hate, it is announced that Oceania was in fact at war with Eastasia: “Eurasia was an ally” (188). The speaker made the switch “in mid-sentence, not only without pause, but without even breaking the syntax” (189).

Moreover, “Nothing altered in his voice or manner, or in the content of what he was saying, but suddenly the names were different” (189). No one at the rally really seems to mind the switch as they launch the same “feral roars of rage” at the “new target” (189). For Winston and his fellow members of the Records Department, the flip-flop requires a massive concerted effort to erase the recorded past of the war with Eurasia (191). Orwell critiques the political rally as a celebration of noise and political conformity, in which any intellectual political content is rendered mute. Unlike the thronging crowds of Henry Green’s *Party Going* or the ones depicted in Orwell’s 1930s books that represent cultural change, mobs of Party members in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* embody cultural stagnation.

Language, in addition to the telescreen, is the essential matrix of noise and power in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In *Animal Farm*, language and its political inflections are put on display on the barn wall as the commandments of Animalism are steadily manipulated to suit Napoleon’s dictatorship. Orwell ups the proverbial ante in his last novel. Newspeak, while mocking supplemental language systems like C. K. Ogden’s Basic English, is intended to replace Oldspeak, and with it any thought or judgment deemed unorthodox by Big Brother. A staunch supporter and developer of Basic, I. A. Richards explains that “Basic English is English made simple by limiting the number of its words to 850, and by cutting down the rules for using them to the smallest number necessary for the clear



statement of ideas” (Richards 23). By minimizing complexity—possibly an anti-modernist move—Basic is designed for the widest usage and translatability.

“‘Debabelization,’” as Ogden puts it, “is now no longer a dream, and it is everybody’s business” (Ogden 167). Basic is intended for international and media use to facilitate the crossing of linguistic, national, and technological boundaries, boundaries Richards believes ultimately lead to aggression and war (Richards 5; Ogden 107). The resemblances between Newspeak and Basic are many, particularly in the reduced grammatical rules and inflections aimed at simplifying usage.<sup>3</sup> Roger Fowler contends that Orwell does not advance a wholesale indictment of Basic English in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but rather uses it as an analogy for Newspeak. While Basic is a “supplementary language existing alongside natural English” with specific functions, “Newspeak is intended to *replace* English as the sole language of the Party members, the complete resource they could draw on for all communicative functions” (Fowler 102).

Orwell’s parody of language in Newspeak emphasizes the imbrications of meaning and power. Orwell is attracted to Basic’s aim of eliminating political high-sounding rhetoric that is actually meaningless to its transparency, but realizes that it creates problems of its own. In a 1944 “As I Please” column in *Tribune*, he writes: “In Basic, I am told, you cannot make a meaningless statement without its being apparent that it is meaningless” (qtd. in Dentith 211). In “Politics and the English Language,” Orwell criticizes the “avoidable ugliness,” “staleness of imagery,” and “lack of precision”

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<sup>3</sup> Newspeak is divided into three main vocabularies (A, B, and C) and a set of grammatical rules for order and inflection. Features of the grammar include the interchangeability of different parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives add -ful, adverbs add -wise), the use of prepositional affixes, use of negations by adding un- and use of intensifiers by adding plus- or doubleplus-, and all inflections followed the same rules (315). The vocabulary of category B is made up largely of compound words that carry the political intent of imposing the desirable mental attitude on the speaker; a kind of verbal shorthand, packing an entire range of ideas in a few syllables, many of which are noun-verbs such as “goodthink” (orthodoxy, or “to think in an orthodox manner”).

that produces a “mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence” (*Essays* 350) that plagues contemporary English usage. Basic English promises the “systematic elimination of verbs” (Ogden 149), which Orwell deems to be a root problem for several of the illnesses above.<sup>4</sup> The issue with Basic, aside from its inevitable contributions to the “avoidable ugliness” of current usage, is ideological. Richards promotes Basic as the ideal language in which to disseminate the heights of European culture. Discussing the Basic edition of Plato’s *Republic*, Richards sounds like an advertising agent and his product, culture: “The abridged version founded on Basic is an example of what may be done through Basic to make the best that has been thought and said on the most urgent matters available most simply to everyone” (Richards 125). Culture and propaganda overlap seamlessly, precisely what Orwell satirizes in the Newspeak Appendix to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

From Big Brother’s limiting perspective, unorthodox thoughts and expressions are noise in the system. Noise abatement is the intended outcome of the wholesale adoption of Newspeak. Newspeak is designed to control the possibility of unorthodox thoughts and expressions, and to instill an automatic, unthinking orthodoxy in the Party member. The goal is “to *diminish* the range of thought” (313) by limiting word choice to a minimum. “In its reduction of the number of words,” Ian Slater explains, “Newspeak at its worst is a direct attack upon metaphor, which, being the expression of conscious comparison, draws heavily on our knowledge of the past and shades of meaning” (205). “Newspeak,” the Appendix begins, “was the official language of Oceania and had been

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<sup>4</sup> Richards describes the elimination of verbs down to a handful of “operators” as a means to improved expression: “These ‘operators,’ in combination with other Basic words, translate adequately more than four thousand verbs of full English. And they do it sometimes with gain in force and clarity” (Richards 33).

devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism” (312), the perfected vision of which is to be embodied in the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak Dictionary. Critics point to the past tense markers (“was,” “had been”) of the Appendix as a positive sign that Big Brother does not last forever, that its domination fails: “The fact that the appendix is written in the past tense demonstrates that the regime of indecency is eventually overthrown, as the pigs on the newly renamed Manor Farm will inevitably be” (Stewart 126).<sup>5</sup> While I do not discount the past tense of Appendix as Orwell’s method of inserting a liberating and satirical innuendo *after* the end of narrative proper, I do think Orwell is more concerned with suggesting that the principles of Newspeak, and not necessarily the dominance of Big Brother, will not last. Orwell is, perhaps, more specifically mocking Ogden’s claim that Basic English is designed to be “the international language of the future” (Ogden 11) than he is suggesting such totalitarianism will be short-lived.

Newspeak paradoxically uses noise to diminish noise. Like other contradictory concepts in the ideology of the Party (crimestop, blackwhite, duckspeak, doublethink, etc.), the point is that one must jam language in order to limit thinking. Homi Bhabha makes the point that language and identification are dialogic by nature, which is why Winston needs O’Brien’s ear for discourse (Bhabha 184-86). Orwell satirizes Newspeak for its aim to eliminate noise—both excessive sounds and unwanted thoughts—by producing more noise, the irony of many noise abatement campaigns. Grammatical regularity is sacrificed to this end since what is most required, “above all for political

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<sup>5</sup> Stewart offers a “mitigatedly optimistic reading” in which the Party is unable to maintain its narrow point of view because: 1) the Appendix is in the past tense; 2) Newspeak reveals its own inner tensions and ultimate instability; 3) Winston’s physical condition “mocks the Party’s lofty self-image”; and, 4) Winston’s thoughts in the Chestnut Tree Café express “residual doubleness,” which Stewart reads as fundamentally antithetical to the monological discourse of Big Brother (Stewart 148)

purposes, were short clipped words of unmistakable meaning which could be uttered rapidly and which roused the minimum of echoes in the speaker's mind" (321). Echoes, in this instance, indicate shades of meaning, alternative connotations and interpretations of a given utterance, passage, or word. The echo is essential to individuated consciousness and its ability to communicate, ensuring that it is not reduced to a "minority of one" (233). But the intention of Newspeak is to make speech "as nearly as possible independent of consciousness" (321), so that words call up their immediate and direct orthodox meaning without any ambiguous interference. This unconscious conveyance of orthodox opinion without interference is what is meant by words like "*duckspeak*" (57).

Words such as duckspeak infuse the Newspeak vocabulary with ambivalence. Not only does it denote "to quack like a duck," where speech issues "from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all," but it also engenders judgment: if the quacking is of orthodox opinions, then the word is given in praise; if not, the term is given as abuse (322, 57). Ameliorative and pejorative definitions depend upon context and individual usage, allowing intent and interpretation to carry semantic weight, precisely what the new vocabulary is meant to eliminate. Winston sits near a man who emitted a constant "noise, a quack-quack-quacking" (57) that rose well above the din of the "deafeningly noisy" (51) canteen. The man is a duckspeaker, his voice "a harsh gabble almost like the quacking of a duck, which pierced the general uproar of the room" (53). Winston could not hear exactly what the man said, but no doubt, the narrator explains, "you could be certain that every word of it was pure orthodoxy, pure Ingsoc. As he watched the eyeless face with the jaw moving rapidly up and down, Winston had a

curious feeling that this was not a real human being but some kind of dummy. It was not the man's brain that was speaking, it was his larynx. The stuff that was coming out of him consisted of words, but it was not speech in the true sense: it was a noise uttered in unconsciousness, like the quacking of a duck" (57). Playing off the pun of "quackery," much as Leonard Woolf does in *Quack, Quack!*, Orwell critiques both what the man says and how he says it. Thus, in addition to ambiguity, duckspeak enunciates noise.

Newspeak claims to value "euphony" over "every consideration other than exactitude of meaning" (321). Yet the use of Newspeak words "encouraged a gabbling style of speech, at once staccato and monotonous" (321). Gabble, which connotes voluble, noisy, confused, unintelligible talk, and is used to refer to inarticulate noises, has less to do with euphony than it does with cacophony. While the opinions that are expressed in this staccato style might be those pleasing to the orthodox mind, the manner in which they are expressed certainly would not be. The Appendix directs that only "correct opinions" should issue from Party members, and they should "spray forth" as "automatically as a machine-gun spraying forth bullets" (322). The metaphor is an apt one because it makes apparent the aggressive, policing function of language when adopted for strictly political, ideologically dubious ends. Newspeak is, then, a "fool-proof instrument, and the texture of the words, with their harsh sound and a certain wilful ugliness which was in accord with the spirit of Ingsoc, assisted the process still further" (322). Newspeak is the grease for the wheels of power, a medium that does the thinking for you. By reducing the vocabulary every year, the hope is to make "articulate speech issue from the larynx without involving the higher brain centres at all," as is the case in duckspeak (322). Newspeak politicizes language, making it one with the expression of

orthodox opinions.

Until Newspeak is implemented across the board, however, Big Brother must continue to eradicate unorthodox thoughts, opinions, and behaviour through surveillance, propaganda, and force. Free from these strictures and concerns are the “proles” or proletariat, the workers of Oceania who are kept below the Inner and Outer Party in the class hierarchy. The proles have a different relationship with Big Brother, and thus with power. In the holding cells of the Ministry of Love, the Party prisoners (the “*polits*”) kept “always silent and terrified” while the ordinary criminals fought back, wrote obscene words on the floor, “and even shouted down the telescreen when it tried to restore order” (240, 238). For Party members like Winston and Julia, rebellion amounts to nothing more than “a look in the eyes, an inflection of the voice; at the most, an occasional whispered word” (72). When Winston and Julia begin their clandestine behaviour, they must modulate their voices and conversations, initially meeting in noisy places like the “noise-filled” canteen with its “racket of voices” (114) and “buzz of conversation” (116). Julia greets Winston in a “low expressionless voice” (119), as they are forced to keep close to silence in order to avoid suspicion. “*If there is hope,*” Winston writes in his diary, “*it lies in the proles*” (72). While the strength of the proles lies in sheer numbers alone, they can accomplish little, according to Winston, until they “become conscious” (72).

Prole voices are not unorthodox because they do not threaten the hierarchy of power, and their voices are not a threat to Big Brother because they are not unorthodox. In the eyes and ears of Big Brother, the proles (the majority of whom do not have telescreens in their abodes) are beneath suspicion: “As the Party slogan put it: ‘Proles and

animals are free” (75). Proles are not meant to have strong political opinions or feelings, and thus their ears are spared the daily bruising of propaganda that Party members must endure to ensure continued and unbreaking orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> Keeping them reserved from politics is keeping them free of opinion, and this renders their collective will pointless. Winston remembers a time walking through the marketplace when he heard “a tremendous shout of hundreds of voices—women’s voices,” a “cry of anger and despair, a deep loud ‘Oh-o-o-o-oh!’ that went humming on like the reverberation of a bell. His heart had leapt. It’s started! he had thought. A riot! The proles are breaking loose at last!” (73). This crowd experience resembles the Two Minutes Hate, though the electric current that coursed through the Party members is instead the “reverberation of a bell,” in which Winston hears “a frightening power” (73). The proles have numbers on their side, and they are not spoken through by Big Brother in the same ways as are Party members. But their revolutionary potential marked by their ruckus is defused and disoriented so that it remains just that: insignificant noise.

Lacking direction and purpose, the proles never riot and their collective noise never acquires meaning. Big Brother uses the culture industry sanctioned by the state to keep the proles down. The culture racket, a common critique in the 1930s and 1940s among neo-conservative culture critics, is given a grossly literal depiction in Orwell’s dystopic vision. The proles are fed a steady diet generated by the culture industry: novels are produced for general consumption on “novel-writing machines” (11), music, poetry, and pornography (46) are all produced in similar ways, while the lottery (89) and public houses (91) contribute by curbing the effects of stark social realities. Noting the paradox

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<sup>6</sup> This auditory relief might explain why the proles are so good at detecting an incoming rocket or “steamer,” though the rockets are said to travel “faster than sound” (87).

of power this entails, Winston records in his diary a fundamental equivocation in unequivocal terms: “*Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious*” (74). Big Brother controls the proles by feeding them predigested bits of culture and keeping them from the overt political noise otherwise showered on members of the Party. Noise can be a stimulant, a spur.

Orwell denigrates the proles for not intellectualizing their experience in light of Big Brother’s cultural racket of disinformation, but he also invests them with the enduring values of what it is to be human in the face of inhumanity. (By contrast Orwell validates working-class homes at the end of the first part of *The Road Wigan Pier*.) “The proles had stayed human,” while Party members had not (172). An example of this is the old prole woman who launders and sings within earshot of Winston and Julia’s window above Mr. Charrington’s junk shop. According to Charlotte Templin, the old prole woman is a “symbol of hope,” a Romantic figure that “embodies human dignity and conveys a message of human endurance” (6, 7). She sings a song written by the Party’s “versificator” about “*an ’opeless fancy*” but she imbues it with the human tones of life and makes “the dreadful rubbish into an almost pleasant sound. [Winston] could hear the woman singing and the scrape of her shoes on the flagstones, and the cries of the children in the street, and somewhere in the far distance a faint roar of traffic, and yet the room seemed curiously silent, thanks to the absence of a telescreen” (NEF 145, 144). The song sung by the prole woman is mixed in with the sounds of a city pastoral, and stands in stark contrast to the Party’s Hate Song with its “savage, barking rhythm” that resembled the “beating of a drum. Roared out by hundreds of voices to the tramp of marching feet, it was terrifying” (155). Of course, roaring is not the same as singing:



“The birds sang, the proles sang, the Party did not sing” (230). Recalling the “torrent of song” (130) that they were given by a thrush during a rendezvous at the edge of the wood, Winston and Julia confirm that, as members of the Party, they were “the dead” (230).

When Winston and Julia are arrested by the Thought Police in their quiet room above Charrington’s junk shop, the illusively soothing soundscape is broken up by violent noise, Big Brother’s trademark. After Julia repeats Winston’s claim, “We are the dead,” an “iron voice” from the telescreen hidden behind the painting echoes it once more with horrific effect (230). The voice, now a “thin, cultivated voice” (231), is Mr. Charrington’s, who looks considerably different to Winston as a member of the Thought Police. He reiterates with chilling resonance the two penultimate lines to the “Oranges and Lemons” nursery rhyme: “‘Here comes a candle to light you to bed, here comes a chopper to chop off your head!’” (231). The nursery rhyme and the church bells they verbalize commemorate forgetting in the novel. Church bells mark out an acoustic community of civil sounds, while nursery rhymes indicate a collective, oral past. Mr. Charrington, whose voice resembled “the tinkling of a worn-out musical-box” (158), is the first to discuss the game children played with the nursery rhyme (102). But it is O’Brien who adds the lines needed to complete the first stanza: “‘*Oranges and lemons, ’ say the bells of St. Clement’s, / ‘You owe me three farthings,’ say the bells of St. Martin’s, / ‘When will you pay me?’ say the bells of Old Bailey, / ‘When I grow rich,’ say the bells of Shoreditch*’” (186).<sup>7</sup> The fact that no one can remember the rhyme in its entirety suggests that the collective past

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<sup>7</sup> Though the rhyme varies, the most popular version continues: “‘When will that be?’ say the bells of Stepney, / ‘I do not know,’ says the great bell of Bow. / Here comes a candle to light you to bed, / And here comes a chopper to chop off your head! / Chip chop chip chop—the last man’s dead.”

is gradually fading out of existence, in accordance with Big Brother's design. Like the song, "Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree," played over the telescreen in two pivotal scenes in the Chestnut Tree Café, "Oranges and Lemons" carries with it multiple meanings in the narrative and Orwell's depiction of the future.<sup>8</sup>

Representing an irreclaimable past, the nursery rhyme, also known as "London Bells," draws attention to the absence of functional churches and church bells in Oceania. There remained a great number of churches, Mr. Charrington explains to Winston, but "they've been put to other uses" (102). After leaving the shop Winston repeats the "half-remembered rhyme" in his head, and he "had the illusion of actually hearing bells, the bells of a lost London that still existed somewhere or other, disguised and forgotten. From one ghostly steeple after another he seemed to hear them pealing forth. Yet so far as he could remember he had never in real life heard church bells ringing" (103). The bells and the churches they synecdochically represent are, according to Robert Plank, the "ghostly bells of a vanished London" that signify the disappearance of a religious sensibility and ethical code of conduct (Plank 90). Church bells, as Alain Corbin and R. Murray Schafer suggest, create particular acoustic soundscapes that define communities by functioning as signals of and calls to worship, alarm, passing, victory, relief, and rejoice. Though Winston has an auditory hallucination of the pealing bells in his mind, the sound nonetheless indicates a time and an acoustic space before Big Brother, when the social world was organized differently and its civic sounds were not

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<sup>8</sup> Fredric Warburg, Orwell's publisher, suggests in his memoirs that the nursery rhyme might well have been running in Orwell's head for some time before he found a use for it in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. "Essex Street runs south from the Strand, leaving it a few yards east of the church of St. Clement Danes, the famous church of the nursery rhyme, 'Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St. Clements.' Perhaps Orwell's grim use of the rhyme in 1984 twelve years later can be put down to the frequency with which he was to pass it on the way to our office" (*Occupation* 174).

amalgamated by the violent valences of the telescreen. During war, bells serve as a warning, but they can also be “authorised to ring out in celebration” (Ziegler 233). No church bells ring out in Oceania, which is in a state of perpetual war. Consciousness, then, has to imagine relief from the noise and paranoia, as Winston does when he leaves the junk shop. Power and hope radiate in the sound of a bell, be it spiritual or political. The Liberty Bell, however silent, remains an icon of liberty, justice, and freedom.<sup>9</sup>

Bells also create narrative echoes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. While the “reverberation of a bell” serves as a metaphor for the power and hope that lie with the proles, the conclusion of Part I situates the bell metaphor so as to signal the gradual passing away of freedom from the individual mind. As Winston attempts to write another entry in his diary and thinks amiably of O’Brien and the potential of freedom he represents, the voice from the telescreen nags him off his train of thought, and the image of Big Brother replaces O’Brien’s in his mind (107). Big Brother’s face was “heavy, calm, protecting: but what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache? Like a leaden knell the words came back at him: War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength” (107). The bell tolls for the free mind, as orthodoxy overrules Winston’s thoughts of liberty and resistance. In the place of freedom, then, comes the will of the Party. Church bells are a kind of unthought in Oceania because the faith, presence, and community they once signified are all functions subsumed within Big Brother’s party system. Religion is replaced by politics, spirituality by ideology, and faith by the absolute will of Big Brother.

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<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most famous ringing of the Liberty Bell took place in 1776 to summon citizens in Philadelphia to the reading of the Declaration of Independence, though historians doubt whether the steeple could have withstood the force of it. A passage from the Declaration of Independence that advocates the “Right of the People to alter or to abolish” any “Form of Government” that has become “destructive” of “certain unalienable Rights,” is included at the end of the Appendix as a text that cannot be rendered into Newspeak “while keeping to the sense of the original” (325). It would, instead, be summed up in “the single word *crimethink*” (325).

This leaden knell is recalled by the nursery rhyme and the “iron voice” that enunciates its chilling lines at the end of Part II, establishing a narrative echo between the two parts of the novel.

The popular song, “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree,” played over the telescreen echoes the theme of dissent in two pivotal scenes. In the first, Winston recalls sitting in the Chestnut Tree Café watching Jones, Aaronson, and Rutherford when, for about a half a minute, “something happened to the telescreens” and the tinny music changed tune and tone: “There came into it—but it was something hard to describe. It was a peculiar, cracked, braying, jeering note: in his mind Winston called it a yellow note. And then a voice from the telescreen was singing: *Under the spreading chestnut tree / I sold you and you sold me: / There lie they, and here lie we / Under the spreading chestnut tree*” (80). The song has been altered so that “kiss” is replaced with “sold.”<sup>10</sup> Winston’s recollection of the song—the scene is itself a memory—is bound up with a notion of truth that he hopes is free from Party control. The three men are the original leaders who, along with Big Brother and Goldstein, orchestrated the revolution, but were later ousted by Big Brother, arrested, and convicted of crimes against the Party. Following their show trials and false confessions, the men were released. Watching them intently while the song played, Winston notes how the men never stirred, but he caught a tear rolling out of Rutherford’s eye. The three men would be arrested again, and executed. Winston

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<sup>10</sup> Critics have pointed to Longfellow’s poem, “The Village Blacksmith,” and to the popular campfire song, “Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree,” for Orwell’s inspiration. In the late 1930s, a popular dance was invented under the same name. Rishona Zimring suggests that the new dance, “The Chestnut Tree,” sought to synthesize the new with the old. Introduced in a 1938 press bulletin as “Modernity—Combined with an Old-time Character,” the dance is advertised as modern, democratic, distinctly English, and decidedly anti-fascist, a means to create unity in the face of perceived external threats: “Its arm movement—both arms upraised—was seen to provide a contrast with the one arm raised in salute to Hitler [...] it was intended to conquer difference, provide an image of unity—across class, not race. It was purely invented; it did not derive from any authentic working-class culture” (Zimring 715).

randomly discovers a photograph that exonerates the men of their trumped up charges some five years later. Hence, the song represents, as the lyrics indicate, both betrayal and truth. While it is associated with a truth that exists beyond the Ministry of Truth, no truth, as the erasure of these men and the faces from history evidences, exists beyond the Party. The song provides a disturbing sound bridge with the final scene, where the broken face and the trickling tear are Winston's. The two scenes mark out the future of dissent as erasure.

Erasure, of course, is not just the domain of the Ministry of Truth, but the Ministry of Love as well. Following their arrest, Winston and Julia are both subjected to heinous torture in the Ministry of Love. Winston's indoctrination and the details of O'Brien's refurbishing of his selfhood have received considerable scholarly dissection. My reading of the politics of noise in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* concludes by returning to the power of the voice, and particularly the human cry. According to Stephen Connor, "The cry—whether of anger, fear or pain—is the purest form of the compact between the voice and power" (Connor 33). "For when we shout," he continues, "we tear" (33). Winston's mind is torn apart in Room 101, leaving in its wake an empty, echoless ruin.

Noise and voice are essential devices in breaking down Winston's resistance to Big Brother, proving more effective than the physical beatings in the gruelling process of indoctrination. The holding cells in Minilove have "four telescreens, one in each wall," which yell at the prisoners to keep silent and their faces uncovered (237, 247). A "noisy, evil-smelling place," the room had a "low, steady humming sound" and an "unvarying white light" that "induced a sort of faintness, an empty feeling inside [Winston's] head" (238, 237, 250). One man, taken beyond his wits' end, sits in the corner emitting a

“wordless howling, like an animal” (249). Though Winston is beaten by the guards consistently, it was, the narrator explains, the “nagging voices” that “broke him down more completely than the boots and fists of the guards” (254). As with the man who screams like an animal, Winston imagines himself “roaring with laughter and shouting out confessions at the top of his voice” (255) as he is marched down the corridor to Room 101. As Richard Rorty argues, the breaking or tearing apart of the mind is O’Brien’s purpose: “The *only* point in making Winston believe that two and two equals five is to break him” (Rorty 178). By denying a basic belief, Rorty explains, one is “incapable of weaving a coherent web of belief and desire” because one can no longer justify oneself to oneself (178). The key is not just the tearing of the mind apart, but the “sound of the tearing” that is the “object of the exercise” (179). Following the “devastating explosion, or what seemed like an explosion, though it was not certain whether there was any noise” (NEF 269), Winston feels as if a piece of his brain had been obliterated in an instant. The “death of the individual is not death,” O’Brien explains, for the “Party is immortal” (282). Winston, then, is “the last man” (282). According to the nursery rhyme, it is off with his head.

O’Brien removes Winston’s core individuality, his sense of moral decency, with noise and fear. Winston begins to adopt the mental athleticism required by Party thinking: “He accepted everything. The past was alterable. The past never had been altered” (290). Once one accepts everything, differences, particularly differences of opinion, cease to resonate. Winston’s doublethink, Bhabha explains, “destroys the event of memory and the verifiability of history by arresting language and consciousness in an endless, ‘frozen’ present: a ‘present’ that is constituted through the act of holding two

contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously" (Bhabha 182). But Winston still holds his hatred for Big Brother, an inner "freedom" (294) that O'Brien must annex. Winston must abdicate his voice and his humanity in order to allow the slogans and the will of Big Brother to speak through him. As O'Brien terrorizes him with rats in a cage, Winston "heard a succession of shrill cries which appeared to be occurring in the air above his head" (299).<sup>11</sup> The cries are his own, and he is reduced to a "screaming animal" (299), "shouting frantically" to put Julia in his stead (300). Winston is forced to throw his voice—the deep groan outside himself—and to subjugate his will to O'Brien's. As Connor points out, the voice is a unique paradox of identity because it leaves the body, and leaves the self while it simultaneously defines it: "My voice is, literally, my way of taking leave of my senses. What I say goes" (Connor 7). In Winston's case in Room 101, what he says, goes, never to return. There is no echo, but only the orthodox response, the response of orthodoxy.

In keeping with the principles of Newspeak, O'Brien's indoctrination of Winston Smith refashions the latter's mind as a conduit of pure orthodoxy. The narrative provides intimate access to Winston's consciousness, marking his recurring memories and searching thoughts that reverberate with a silent conviction that Big Brother is not the face of salvation and truth. In the final scene in the Chestnut Tree Café, it becomes clear that Winston's mind has been blown out like a building in the blitz. Or, to use a more fitting metaphor with the ones developed here, his mind becomes an anechoic chamber in which unorthodox thoughts no longer resonate. Only orthodoxy sounds in his mind,

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<sup>11</sup> In "A Hanging" (1931), Orwell describes the trying execution of a native Burman and the silencing of "abominable noise" (*Essays* 17), in which he experiences a kind of abdication of self when he, uncomfortably, finds himself "laughing quite loudly" at the man's death (18). The essay, which reads like a short story, is defined by several prominent uncontrollable elements, none more raucous than the irrepressible dog.

and it bears no echo. Seated in the Chestnut Tree Café and “listening” to the broadcasts and “tinny music” that “trickled from the telescreen” (300), Winston is no longer intent on getting beyond earshot of the telescreen. As he replays O’Brien’s words in his head, he comes to realize that “There were things, your own acts, from which you could not recover. Something was killed in your breast: burnt out, cauterised out” (303-4). While Winston ponders the substance of his deliverance and his encounter with Julia following their mutual betrayal of one another, “Something changed in the music that trickled from the telescreen. A cracked and jeering note, a yellow note, came into it. And then—perhaps it was not happening, perhaps it was only a memory taking on the semblance of sound—a voice was singing: *Under the spreading chestnut tree / I sold you and you sold me*” (307). With tears in his eyes, like the three exiles before him, Winston relies on Victory gin and telescreen broadcasts, for nobody cared what he did anymore, “no whistle woke him, no telescreen admonished him” (307). Winston, hearing vague “triumphant phrases” of a crowd, imagines that he is with the them, “cheering himself deaf” (310). Having had his head figuratively chopped off in Room 101, it now rolls around in the street with a post-revolutionary macabre. Winston has been separated from himself, become a part of the general noise. Killing a man, as Orwell represents it in “A Hanging,” like killing a mind, cannot be done quietly.

The Oedipal desire to kill, overthrow, or bring down the father becomes, by the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a resolutely anti-Oedipal narrative as Winston finds love and understanding in Big Brother. Winston, “sitting in a blissful dream,” returns in his mind to the Ministry of Love, “with everything forgiven, his soul white as snow,” and the “long-hoped-for bullet was entering his brain” (311). Winston’s mind is no longer for



recollections, for independent thought, for hope, but merely a tabula rasa upon which the only signature is Big Brother's. Recalling the conclusion to the first part of the novel in which the face of Big Brother "gazed up" (107) at Winston from the coin he held in his hand, the conclusion to the third and final part of the novel depicts Winston face-to-face with Big Brother's iconic visage: "He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breast! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. But it was all right, everything was all right, the struggle was finished. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother" (311). The history of the self is erased as the noise of the mind is soundproofed.

Critics remain divided over the meaning of Winston's diminished psyche and apparent submission to the will of Big Brother. Though Anthony Stewart finds these closing scenes rife with the "doubleness" of perspective that maintains resistance to Big Brother's monological discourse (Stewart 148-51), Erika Gottlieb reads the novel otherwise: "Having lost his private self, he draws strength from the hysterical worship of the Party: he has come to love Big Brother. This is the horror that had to lie embedded in the future all along, the secret behind Big Brother's smile hiding behind the dark moustache" (252). Without question, Winston's mind has been forever altered, and his relations to the political have changed radically from what they were earlier in the narrative. If José Ortega y Gasset is right when he claims that the "selection of a point of view is the initial action of culture" (*The Modern Theme* 60), then *Nineteen Eighty-Four* signals the end of culture, for point of view is obliterated.

Arguably, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* also signals the end of modernism. In Chapter Five, I discussed the way Orwell's works document the noise of the political in the 1930s and the culmination of those sounds into alarums by the end of the decade. In his 1940s novels, Orwell focuses instead on the politics of noise in his two satires of totalitarianism. Both novels could easily be transcribed as plays for radio broadcast, and Orwell's attention to voice, particularly in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, suggest that his time on the air left a deep impression on his sensibility to the politics of voice. In many ways, Orwell puts a political period on the end of a long, modernist sentence about the dissolution of boundaries, the multiple modulations of consciousness and perspective, the convoluted syntax and semantics of modern discourse, and the loss of a social centre and religious sensibility anchored in enduring traditions. Big Brother provides meaning and a centre to which all must hold. At the end of modern culture, the noise of totalitarianism sounds loud and clear.

## Conclusion: Reading Noise

Later British modernists were expert listeners. Radical changes and upheavals, from the standardization of technologies and the alterations of interior space to the amplifications of partisan politics and world war, demanded that modernists reorient their relationship to the acoustic. With keen ears, Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, and George Orwell listened to and evaluated the racket of the modern soundscape. They also incorporated intent, even paranoid listeners bent on precluding auditory intrusions into their fiction and non-fiction. For all three authors, noise became an aesthetic strategy and the embodiment of the anxieties of the time. Authors' and characters' responses to unsettling noises acquired ethical and political dimensions. Representing and imagining worlds characterized by din and intermittent silences, Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell use noise to critique four distinct but related structures of meaning: technology, language, politics, war.

The anxieties that noise embodies are manifested in the illicit pleasures and terrors of listening. Bowen's *The Last September* is rife with eavesdroppers who ignore the ruckus that surrounds them. Characters resolutely fail to hear the noises of political upheaval while they engage in shallow chatter. Waugh's *Vile Bodies* celebrates cosy idleness to no end, and the obliviousness of his Bright Young People to the significance of noise generates comedy. The politics of silence intersperses with the din of war in *The Heat of the Day*, in which Bowen's characters become especially careful listeners. Likewise, in Waugh's spoof, *Put Out More Flags*, the roguish Basil Seal understands the value of listening, particularly when it serves his political ends during the Phoney War. In his

travel writing, Waugh presents himself as an acute listener. The foreign noises that he hears during his peregrinations confirm the values of civilization and minority culture. For Orwell, listening is a dual, fraught, and sometimes paradoxical act. Orwell's distinct ear fortifies class differences as much as it breaks down the tenor of propaganda. Central figures in Orwell's novels make it their business to hear in the noises around them the dire presages of the political future.

Wary approaches to technology and the political are typical of cultural critics and authors of the 1930s and 1940s. Blaring radios and gramophones litter the pages of fiction and non-fiction alike as a shorthand for ideological repetition and propaganda. Charles Ryder bemoans the wireless incessantly playing as the auditory marker of a new age in *Brideshead Revisited*. Leonard Woolf concludes the final volume of his autobiography, *Downhill All the Way* (1967) with a reminiscence of planting irises one afternoon: "Suddenly I heard Virginia's voice calling to me from the sitting-room window: 'Hitler is making a speech.' I shouted back: 'I shan't come. I'm planting iris and they will be flowering long after he is dead.' Last March, 21 years after Hitler committed suicide in the bunker, a few of those violet flowers still flowered under the apple-tree in the orchard" (254). In Woolf's metaphor, culture outgrows noise in time; the quietness of gardening triumphs over Hitler's aggressive barking on the wireless.

The war had its backdrop of noise. According to Orwell in "Decline of the English Murder" (1946), a murder trial captured headlines "because it provided distraction amid the doodle-bugs and the anxieties of the Battle of France. Jones and Hulten committed their murder to the tune of V1, and were convicted to the tune of V2" (*Essays* 347). Novels of the blitz and the immediate postwar era, such as Henry

Green's *Caught* (1943) and *Back* (1946), and Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear* (1943) and *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), figure the uncanny reverberations of war-noise on the psyche as much as they do bombs on buildings, long after the dust has settled. Angela Lyne's trauma during the Phoney War in *Put Out More Flags* comes largely as a result of wireless transmissions about the war.

Eerie noises also echo through modernist style, as authors depict the urgency of their time and the concomitant alloying of the English language. Bowen's style is modernist and experimental, with an eye toward the domestic fiction of the past and an ear to the politics and history of her time. Her renovations in narrative, language, and character mirror her efforts to present a soundscape in writing attuned to the vibrations of history. Orwell's style, renowned for its lucidity, is anything but modernist in its experimentation, and anything but experimental in its modernism. It is, on the one hand, resolutely realist in the documentary sense of the term. His prose is stripped down and purified. On the other hand, the ambition in the 1930s to describe things as they really were bore a revolutionary intention. Orwell's reportage from this period both exemplifies and challenges the revolutionary impulse of non-fiction. In the 1940s, Orwell's writing turned to the fantastic and dystopian. The tenets of modernist style are scrutinized through the pared-down language of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or the graffiti on the barn wall in *Animal Farm*, both of which serve propagandistic purposes. Writing eliminates noise, but it fills the mind with poisonous pellets of language. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the competing claims of noise and consciousness place narrative under intense pressure. Winston Smith succumbs to torturous, noisy intrusions into his consciousness. In comparison, Waugh's experiments with objective narration, cinematic

techniques, and dialogue are most modernist in the least recognizable way because they do not fixate unduly on subjective consciousness. In his style, Waugh does not propagandize; he snipes.

The nature of conversation changed in the 1930s and the 1940s, as evidenced by the voices “keyed up and up” in so many of the novels read here. According to David Lodge, writers of the 1930s “foreground dialogue in their fiction” by focusing on “social and verbal interaction, presented objectively and externally” (Lodge 81). In contrast to the modernist novel preoccupied with consciousness, interiority, and dreams, the 1930s novelist, especially Evelyn Waugh, turns attention to talk: “stream of consciousness gives way to a stream of talk, but it is talk without the reassuring gloss of the classic novel’s authorial voice, without a privileged access to the thoughts and motivations of characters, so that the ‘modern’ note of disillusion, fragmentation and solipsism persists” (Lodge 81). In the 1940s, conversation blurs these boundaries even further because even the most innocuous conversation might contain encoded information of value to the enemy. Careless talk costs lives; loose lips sink ships. As Bowen’s Stella Rodney, Orwell’s Winston Smith, and Waugh’s Basil Seal evince, talk in the 1940s is anything but careless.

In their ability to assign meaning to the quotidian, expert listeners are more than anything accomplished modernist readers. All modernists, I think it safe to say, sought and admired devout readers. Even during the Second World War, against paper rationing and overriding anxiety, people managed to read. Despite the war raging overhead, culture carried on, in things, in people, in habits. According to Cyril Connolly, “there was very little to do in the blackout but read, and people enjoyed it” (Connolly 212). In *The Heat of the Day*, Stella reads on while bombers cough and screech overhead. Reading is never a

quiet affair during war. Yet reading is one way of ignoring events. By the same token, reading is a dissident activity. Readers, of course, read alongside Winston Smith in the room above the junk-shop in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His reading is coded from the early pages of the novel as illicit and ill advised. In *Homage to Catalonia*, Orwell argues that reading *Mein Kampf* was sanctioned during the Spanish Civil War, but reading Stalin was seditious. So, too, the reader of Orwell's prose might commit an act of dissent, even treachery.

Modernisms divide between silences and noisy distractions. During the war, maintaining silence was a way of helping the nation's cause. Michael Balfour points to this ethic in the Ministry of Information's counter-publicity campaign of "The Silent Column", on the thesis that keeping silent was the best way of countering the Fifth Column" (Balfour 190). Some of those who did not remain silent during the war—Lord Haw-Haw, for example—were tried for their treasonous public speeches. After the noise of the war, a certain silence, speaking volumes, set in. Pericles Lewis suggests how Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) employs "silence" as one its most regular stage directions. The play itself concerns "the sounds we make to avoid awkward silences" (242). In William Sansom's short story "The Witnesses," a short silence precedes crucial events: "Before every great catastrophe there is said to be a pause, a terrible imagined silence. Threatened men for the first time in their lives become aware of certainty" (qtd. in Mengham 127). If noise disconcerts politics, silence determines conviction.

Noise is an integral feature of British modernism, particularly in its latter, mature stages in the 1930s and 1940s. Noise—unusual and unwanted sounds that disturb, interspersed with significant and prolonged silences—is never neutral. It indicates the

struggle for power, because it afflicts people at a physical level. Noise is implicated in technological change and social upheaval as much as it is inextricable from communication and the nuances of prose. Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell responded to the changing acoustics of the 1930s and 1940s by incorporating noise into their works as thematic preoccupations and formal strategies. Noise represents many things in many contexts, but during this period it routinely hearkens back to the political. Grouping Bowen, Waugh, and Orwell together through the modernist preoccupation with noise, I hope to put to rest certain critical commonplaces about modernism. Elaborating the critical categories of “late modernism” and “intermodernism” helps to reconfigure the meanings of modernism. To consider the continuity between the 1930s and 1940s reorients the political critique and social purpose of literature.



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