



The “Quietude of Conscience” and the
Magnetism of Sound:
Listening to Nathaniel Hawthorne’s
The House of the Seven Gables

REBECCA BECHTOLD

I N his *American Notebooks*, Nathaniel Hawthorne records a moment of stillness on a warm Concord day in 1844. Resting in a “shallow space scooped out among the woods,” he reflects on the “peculiar impressiveness” of “being made acquainted with the flight of the bird” from only the “shadow” that “flits across a sunny spot.” It “affects the mind,” he writes, “more than if the eye had actually seen it.”¹ In his emphasis on the interplay between light and dark, of shadow and substance, Hawthorne’s description evokes what will become in the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* his definition of the “Romance.” In Hawthorne’s words, the writer of the “Romance,” unlike that of the “Novel,” must “manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture.” Only then can he avoid “impal[ing] the story with its moral.”² Here, as Alan Trachtenberg explains, the “mode of ‘Romance’” becomes merely “another kind of mimesis, atmospheric, shadowed, faithful to that which flits away.”³ It is a reminder of things “unseen,” or to return

¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, “American Notebooks,” *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 8:245, 247.

²Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 3, 4. Subsequent citations of the novel will appear in the text.

³Alan Trachtenberg, “Seeing and Believing: Hawthorne’s Reflections on the Daguerreotype in *The House of the Seven Gables*,” *American Literary History* 9 (1996): *The New England Quarterly*, vol. XC, no. 1 (March 2017). © 2017 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved. doi:10.1162/TNEQ.a.00585.

to Hawthorne's *American Notebooks*, of "how narrow, scanty, and meager" our "observations" are when "compared with the immensity" of what could be.⁴

But it is not only sunshine "glimmer[ing] through shadow" that makes visible the objects flittering just outside of Hawthorne's field of vision.⁵ The "shallow space" Hawthorne inhabits also is populated by sounds that shape his perception of a world just outside his vision's reach. Indeed, sounds do not merely occupy "a neutral environment," as Alexander Fisher reminds us, but are responsible for "*creating* a sense of space for auditors."⁶ In this way, the sounds surrounding Hawthorne's private retreat—his "acoustic horizon"—provide knowledge of sites unseen.⁷ A bird clearly chirps somewhere "overhead," yet its exact location remains "hidden" from Hawthorne's searching eyes. So too does he gain aural awareness of the "village clock" despite its distance: its remote chimes sound "distinctly upon the ear," carried by a breeze gently shaking the white pines around him. Even the sounds of "mowers whetting their scythes" in some far-off field find their way to Hawthorne's private retreat. These muted "sounds of labor"—like the "tinkling of a cow-bell" whose dissonant noise, because faraway, becomes "musical" to Hawthorne's ears—"do but increase the quiet of

460-81, at 461. Much has been made of the relationship of daguerreotypy to Hawthorne's definition of the romance. See Cathy Davidson, "Photographs of the Dead: Sherman, Daguerre, Hawthorne," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89 (1990): 667-700; Lara Langer Cohen, "What's Wrong with This Picture? Daguerreotypy and Magic in *The House of the Seven Gables*," *Arizona Quarterly* 60 (2004): 39-69; and Marcy Dinius, *The Camera and the Press: American Visual and Print Culture in the Age of the Daguerreotype* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 49-85.

⁴Hawthorne, "American Notebooks," 247, 250.

⁵Hawthorne, "American Notebooks," 246.

⁶*Music, Piety, and Propaganda: The Soundscape of Counter-Reformation Bavaria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 11. Similarly, Steven Connor describes how sound "inhabits and occupies space; and it also actively procures space for itself . . . because [it] . . . is space." *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

⁷Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter define an "acoustic horizon" as "the maximum distance between a listener and a source of sound where the sonic event can still be heard." *Spaces Speak, Are you Listening? Experiencing Aural Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 22.

one who lies at his ease,” evoking, rather than destroying, the “sacredness of the Sabbath.”⁸

Echoes of a world far distant, yet perceived as if near at hand, these documented sounds become a record of Hawthorne’s aurally expanding worldview, of “events *heard*, not objects *seen*.”⁹ Still, the reality they represent—the steady grind of blade against stone, the gentle amble of cattle—has already passed in the time it takes for these sounds to reach Hawthorne’s ears, let alone for him to capture them on paper. They are a spiritual haunting of what once was, of the “lostness of past time.”¹⁰ For even in the “bottomless depths of quiet” can the memory of sound still resonate with past life. “Thank God, there are echoes of voices in my heart,” Hawthorne wrote to an absent Sophia in 1847, “else I should die of this marble silence.”¹¹

Even more than sight, then sound captures Hawthorne’s definition of the “Romance,” connecting “a bygone time with the very present that is flitting away” (4). Indeed Hawthorne would later identify the historicity of sound as its primary draw, writing in *Seven Gables* of how sound’s “charm lay chiefly in the past”—the way in which its “brisk life” and “sunshiny existence” preserved in the present the “dissonance of yore” (139-40). Despite such statements, little consideration has been paid to Hawthorne’s use of sound and silence in *The House of the Seven Gables*; scholars instead tend to read Hawthorne’s 1851 novel as mainly engaged with the visual.¹² These readings, while

⁸Hawthorne, “American Notebooks,” 246-48.

⁹R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), 8. Schafer is attributed with coining the term “soundscape.”

¹⁰“If there are such things as natural symbols,” Jonathan Rée observes, “then sounds are surely the natural symbol of transience and the lostness of past time. They are essentially evanescent, an exact correlative of wistfulness and poignant regret.” *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses—A Philosophical History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 23-24.

¹¹Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1843-1853,” *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 16:212.

¹²Sean J. Kelly contends that Hawthorne “utilizes the artistic metaphor of *chiaroscuro*” as a “useful visual correlative for the literary romance” in “Hawthorne’s ‘Material Ghosts’: Photographic Realism and Liminal Selfhood in *The House of the*

persuasive, favor an ocularcentric methodology that could be usefully expanded by a study of sound. As soundscape historian Mark Smith reminds us, “There is no compelling reason why we should ‘read’ the past solely through the visual in order to gain ‘perspective.’”¹³ As recent historians of the book have shown, bibliographic culture in Hawthorne’s time extended beyond the printed word, engaging with “a variety of non-print, non-book, and non-text practices and sites.” Nineteenth-century reading habits too revealed an “increasingly sophisticated intermedial sensibility” that assumed a level of aurality/orality far different from today’s more silent modes of reading.¹⁴ For many nineteenth-century Americans, reading aloud was “a form of sociality” highly encouraged for its beneficial impact.¹⁵ As Lydia Maria Child explained in *The Mother’s Book*, “The habit of taking turns to read interesting books aloud,” along with the practice of listening to music, “has a very salutary effect for whole families” for it “tends to produce refinement of taste.”¹⁶

Hawthorne was not immune to the period’s developing interest in intermediality. He was particularly mindful of how technological changes in book publishing affected his readership.

Seven Gables.” *Papers on Language and Literature* 47 (2011): 228. Shawn Michelle Smith similarly turns to the novel’s “visual architectures” in *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 8.

¹³Mark Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 262. For other American soundscape studies, see Kala Keeling and Josh Kun, eds., *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) and Mark M. Smith, ed., *Hearing History: A Reader* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

¹⁴Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16, 185. Michael Cohen further explains how readers adopted a “diverse set of practices that include acts of quoting, reciting, memorizing, rewriting, parodying, reading collectively, reading aloud, exchanging, scrapbooking, cataloging, editing, anthologizing, and transcribing” written works. *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 10.

¹⁵“Until the advent of the new forms of leisure after the First World War,” Peter Middleton explains, the “ordinary experience for almost everyone . . . included participation in groups listening to texts read aloud.” “The Contemporary Poetry Reading,” *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 272-73.

¹⁶Lydia Maria Child, *The Mother’s Book* (Boston: Carter, Hendee, and Babcock, 1831), 155.

Hawthorne wrote to his editor J. T. Fields, for instance, of his willingness to include a wooden engraving of his likeness alongside his biography, noting he “should not have the least objection . . . to be diffused over the whole habitable globe” even if this “sort of monstrosity” inevitably made him “look like . . . a block-head.”¹⁷ Still, Hawthorne resisted adding his Cephas Thompson portrait to *The House of the Seven Gables*, explaining to Fields “it appears to me an improper accompaniment to a new work.”¹⁸ Hawthorne, however, actively embraced the aural dimensions of his novel. Early in 1851, he read his manuscript aloud to Sophia whose critical ear he had come to trust. Only “after going over it in that way,” he told Fields on January 12th, would he “know better what to think of it.”¹⁹ She “speaks so near me that I cannot tell her voice from my own,” he later declared of his wife’s editorial skill.²⁰

Making audible that which has gone too often unheard in Hawthorne scholarship thus offers insights not only into the listening practices of a nineteenth-century readership but also of Hawthorne’s own perception of his story-telling role. Indeed, Hawthorne was far from deaf to the potentialities of sound as *The House of the Seven Gables* attests. From the persistent ringing of Hepzibah Pyncheon’s shop bell to the unrelenting ticking of a watch, Hawthorne’s tale detailing seven generations of “wrong-doing” is haunted by a vast array of auralities, all of which disclose, although in differing ways, the politics

¹⁷Hawthorne offered another assessment in a May 20, 1851 letter to Louisa Hawthorne asking “Have you seen a horrible wood engraving of me which, with as horrible a biography, has been circulating in the Magazines and newspapers?” *The Letters, 1843-1853*, 400, 433.

¹⁸Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1843-1853,” 398.

¹⁹Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1843-1853,” 382. The Hawthornes regularly engaged in the practice of reading aloud. Julian Hawthorne described both parents as “good readers; there were music, variety, and expression in every tone, and the charm of feeling that the reader was in sympathy with the reading” in *Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife: A Biography*, 2 (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1885): 8-9, 376. Sophia similarly described her “husband’s voice” as the “best music,” Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, *Memories of Hawthorne* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1897), 143.

²⁰Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1857-1864,” *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 18:256.

of audibility emerging in the United States in the antebellum period (4). To be sure, late eighteenth-century listening practices in the United States encouraged, as Kala Keeling and Josh Kun observe, “an exclusionary auditory politics of self, citizen, and Other” that “render[ed] sonically incomprehensible or silent the Others that freedom refused.”²¹ Still, the expansion of industrial markets and the resulting urban growth in Hawthorne’s lifetime drastically shifted how New Englanders heard the world around them, developing what Henry David Thoreau would call in 1854 “the broad, flapping American ear.”²² It is this emerging soundscape, and the listening practices it imposes, that Hawthorne interrogates in *The House of the Seven Gables*, a novel that proves to be particularly interested in the impact of these developing auditory-acoustic structures on constructions of the self.

But even as Hawthorne’s contemporaries were learning to tune out the dissonances of this new aural landscape, others were trying to tune in to the ephemeral, and often contested, audible manifestations emanating from the spectral realm. By 1848, the year Margaret and Kate Fox claimed to hear mysterious knockings in their New York home, spirit rappings, spirit concerts, speaking in tongues, and other such aural disturbances were well on their way to becoming commonplace occurrences for religious enthusiasts seeking to eavesdrop on the supernatural world. It is to these spiritual soundings, in all their dissonances and discords, that Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* finally turns, offering a competing, and at times corrective, aurality to the destabilizing force of the modern world, all the while recognizing sound’s relationship “to the sacral, to the ultimate concerns of existence.”²³ For in

²¹Introduction to *Sound Clash*, 11.

²²Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden; or Life in the Woods, The Main Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 364.

²³Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982), 72. While Hawthorne’s aversion to mesmerism and Spiritualist practices has been well noted, nothing critical has been said of Hawthorne’s attention to the magnetic power of sound despite its portrayal in antebellum discourse as a

Hawthorne's handling of it is this "quietude of conscience" (230), and not the "ugly noise" of the modern world (99), that deserves a second listen.



Early in *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hepzibah Pyncheon first hears what becomes her curse. Resting anxiously in the "oaken elbow-chair" that once held her dead ancestor, Colonel Pyncheon, she is "startled by the tinkling alarum—high, sharp, and irregular—of a little bell." The bell's ringing, however "ugly and spiteful" its "little din" may seem to Hepzibah's aristocratic ears, merely registers her entry into "the united struggle of mankind," or so her first customer, the daguerreotypist Holgrave, kindly tries to tell her (38-40). Yet Hepzibah has lived a life relatively removed from the aural disturbances of the nineteenth century's expanding market, only eavesdropping on the town's bustling trade—the "jingle-jangle" of the baker's cart and the "harsh peal of a fisherman's conch-shell"—from the comfort and security of her home. Economic necessity, though, has forced Hepzibah to join the working classes, engendering a "great life-trial" that wrecks havoc on her aural sensibilities (37). What is perhaps a relatively unobtrusive sound for those more familiar with the marketplace is, then, for Hepzibah particularly unsettling. "Ring as often as it might," the narrator writes of the shop's bell, "the sound always smote upon her nervous system rudely and suddenly" (69).

The emergence of an industrial-capitalist society in the first half of the century generated concerns over sound's impact on everyday life. The rapid growth of cities and factories produced a level of noise that contrasted sharply with the comparative quiet of the eighteenth century's preindustrial society. For some, these modern sounds of industry were welcomed

medium capable of achieving mesmeric exchange. For Hawthorne's interactions with mesmerism, see Taylor Stoehr, "Hawthorne and Mesmerism," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 33 (1969): 33-60 and Samuel Chase Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998).

as evidence of northern economic progress, an attitude Michel Chevalier conveyed in his 1839 assessment of New England's bustling trade. To his ears, the "noise of hammers, of spindles, of bells calling the hands to their work" common to northeastern factory towns merely sounded like the "peaceful hum of an industrious population."²⁴ Not all, however, were as in tune to the auditory intensity of urban life. Anti-noise advocates sought out ordinances to ensure the "natural and constitutional right . . . to worship God without molestation or disturbance" on the Sabbath.²⁵ Local authorities similarly responded to noise complaints, proposing legislation to regulate what was considered by many to be unnecessary noise. One 1844 bill, for instance, recommended that those who "engage in any tumultuous or disorderly noise," including "open profanity or indecent language," should be "committed to the work-house."²⁶ Others took a less aggressive approach, merely complaining of modernity's invasive auralty as Hawthorne did when he wrote resentfully of a locomotive's "long shriek" disturbing the "slumberous peace" of his Concord morning Sabbath in 1844. Its "harsh" sound, he complained, told "of all unquietness"—of "busy men, citizens, from the hot street."²⁷

To this unquiet world Hawthorne turns in *The House of the Seven Gables'* opening chapters when detailing the noisy auditory culture that surrounds Hepzibah's cent-shop. Even though Hepzibah walks on "tiptoe" throughout her store, her

²⁴Michel Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States: Being a Series of Letters on North America* (Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Company, 1839), 129. See also Smith, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, chaps. 4, 5.

²⁵Cited in Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 27.

²⁶*Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States: Being the First Session of the Twenty-Eighth Congress* (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1844), 1055. Such rulings were often met with resistance by tradesmen who argued that "noise was a kind of public information." Susan Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theater in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 30.

²⁷Hawthorne, "American Notebooks," 248-49. Hawthorne's sound sensitivity may have been augmented by Sophia's headaches, which were "typically tripped off by unexpected noises." T. Walter Herbert, *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 38.

entry into the fast-paced world of commodity consumption is anything but quiet. She unbars the door with a “most astounding clatter” and, fleeing from the sound, wishes instead for “her quiet grave” (36-37, 39). A series of unpleasant noises, however, follow her throughout the day. The cent-shop’s “creaking” door is “thrust open” with a “characteristic jerk and jar,” rattling the “little bell” so “spitefully” that its sound “played the very deuce with Hepzibah’s nerves.” Her ears are further assaulted by the “muttering” of an inebriated man and the sharp “rebuke” of a “fire-ruddy housewife” disappointed in the store’s wares. Their “familiar, if not rude tone” offends her “lady-like sensibilities” for it all too clearly reveals that they “considered themselves not merely her equals, but her patrons and superiors” (45, 46, 48-49). While Hepzibah comes to appreciate the “jingled” noise her hard-earned copper coins make as they drop “into the till” (72), the cent-shop’s other auralities ultimately disturb her “ideas of gentility,” making her too keenly feel her own artificial place as a lady in society (69). “I was born a lady,” she tells Holgrave, “but I consider that has past” (40-41).

The cent-shop scenes thus acknowledge how the market’s democratization in the early nineteenth century reconfigured existing social relations in distinctively aural ways. Yet little critical consideration has been paid to this aural environment as scholars have privileged instead the spectatorial nature of these opening passages. As several recent critics have noted, Hepzibah’s decision to open a cent-shop in her home essentially invites “the market into her private life,” allowing, in Hawthorne’s words, “strange and unloving eyes” the “privilege of gazing” upon her and her shop (42).²⁸ Of this passage Shawn Michelle Smith writes, “The familiar gaze terrifies Hepzibah Pyncheon, as it symbolically dismantles the privileges of class

²⁸“Hepzibah’s decline from gentility forces her to open a cent-shop in her home, and by introducing the market into her private life, she becomes a target both of town gossip and the physical intrusion of the town’s people.” Milette Shamir, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 163. Gillian Brown writes similarly of this scene in *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 82.

hierarchy. Thus, it is . . . her subjection to public scrutiny on intimate terms that transforms Hepzibah from a lady into a plebian woman.”²⁹ However, it is the sounds of the marketplace, and not its sights, that initially inform Hepzibah of the public’s interest in her shop. In the relative quiet of the morning, she “listen[s]” with “beating heart” to “the footsteps of early passengers” as they linger outside her shop, sounds that evoke a “sense of overwhelming shame” in Hepzibah as she awaits the public’s appraisal of her shop (42).

This appraisal comes soon enough in a conversation Hepzibah has the misfortune to overhear between “two laboring men” stopping before the shop door. Their “rough voices,” clearly heard through the cent-shop’s thin walls, offer an unflattering evaluation of her business and her trademark scowl. “For some reason or other, not very easy to analyze,” Hawthorne writes, “there had hardly been so bitter a pang in all her previous misery about the matter, as what thrilled Hepzibah’s heart, on overhearing the above conversation” (42, 43). Here, Hepzibah’s ability to identify the men as laborers by their voices alone underscores sound’s function in the modern period as an aural marker of class. But this passage also reveals the laboring classes’ emerging authority in the new global market as well, illustrating a type of “acoustic dominance” in the two men’s apparent disregard for who might hear them.³⁰ Forced to listen to their “coarse laugh” and degrading remarks as they stand outside her home-turned-shop, the once-aristocratic Hepzibah can only silently feel, with a “bitter . . . pang,” the “misery” of her new position (43).

²⁹*American Archives*, 27. Many have remarked on the cent-shop’s centrality to the novel as signaling the Pyncheon family’s continued reliance on an exploitative mercantilism. Paul Gilmore suggests that Hepzibah participates in “racial exploitation” when she sells, among other commodities, a Jim Crow gingerbread man. But if the cent-shop indicates Hepzibah’s complicity, however reluctant, in an economic system dependent upon the marginalization of others, he points out that it effectively reveals the “dangers of the marketplace” to her sense of self. *The Genuine Article: Race, Mass Culture, and American Literary Manhood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 129-31.

³⁰Weiner defines “acoustic dominance” as “not so much a matter of drowning out all other sounds with one’s voice, but of being able to take for granted the right to do so without complaint.” *Religion Out Loud*, 20.

Hepzibah's silence amidst the cent-shop's "rude" tones ultimately suggests her own cultural alienation, her struggle to maintain her family's longstanding tradition of economic control, as well as the nineteenth century's more general inability to regulate the urban market's expanding soundscape in a manner palatable to middle-class taste. Read in this way, the cent-shop's sonic environment becomes a kind of "map," to borrow from Jacques Attali's cultural study of noise, that "specifies power, because it marks the rare noises that cultures, in their normalization of behavior, see fit to authorize."³¹ Nowhere is sound's function as a signal of social power more clearly experienced by Hepzibah than in the shop-bell's repetitive ringing. Its persistent clamor—variously described as an "alarum" (38), a "sharp and peevish tinkle," a "hateful clamor," "an ugly noise," a "naughty little tinkle" (98, 99), and a "vulgar . . . dissonance" (19), among other epithets—infiltrates the shop's sonic space. The bell's "peevishly obstreperous" timing not only interrupts Hepzibah's sense of leisure, calling her from a breakfast table luxuriously spread with "crested tea-spoons and antique china" but also reminds Hepzibah of her own commodification within the shop's walls (69). To its ringing, the narrator writes, "[t]he maiden lady arose upon her feet, as pale as ghost at cock-crow; for she was an enslaved spirit, and this the talisman to which she owed obedience" (38). Like the Pyncheon men who are cursed with a "habitual," but "not altogether voluntary," "ingurgitation" in the throat (108), so too is Hepzibah cursed to respond in body, if not in mind, to the shop-bell's "ugly and spiteful little din" (38). Her heart, the narrator writes, "seemed to be attached to the same steel spring" and "went through a series of sharp jerks, in unison with the sound" (44).

The acoustic environment of the cent-shop, and the structures of listening it imposes, thus accentuates sound's function as a regulatory power, one that "compels silence" in those who

³¹Brian Massumi, trans., *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 19-20.

have no choice but to listen.³² Even more than Hepzibah, however, her brother Clifford experiences the deafening power of silence and the social alienation it produces as an inmate of Boston's penitentiary system. Imprisoned for thirty years for a crime he did not commit, Clifford returns to the seven-gabled house a changed man. The prison's lack of "intellectual culture," the narrator explains, introduces a "coarseness" into his otherwise "high-wrought and delicately refined" nature (93, 94); a kind of "abortive decay" has "transformed" Clifford "into the simplest child" (189). Though the narrator comments extensively on the effects of Clifford's incarceration, Hawthorne is curiously silent on the years Clifford has spent in prison, only noting that his sentence was mitigated at some point "from death to perpetual imprisonment" (21).

Convicted of his uncle's murder, Clifford's punishment occurred at a moment in which the United States was changing the theories that shaped its penal system. Late eighteenth-century reformers like Benjamin Rush advocated the efficacy of rehabilitation over corporeal punishments including the death penalty. Capital punishment for even severe crimes like murder, Rush argued, was "contrary to the order and happiness of society . . . [as well as] contrary to *divine revelation*." In its stead, Rush proposed in his 1798 *Enquiry into the Consistency of the Punishment of Murder by Death* a more lenient "scale of punishment," reserving solitary confinement—strict "solitude and darkness, and a total *want* of employment"—for convicts like Clifford imprisoned for the "first or highest degree of guilt."³³

In the 1820s, the period of Clifford's imprisonment, the American penal system was being rebuilt following these Enlightenment reforms, including architectural renovations with

³²Attali is speaking of the "monotonous and repeated noise of machines imposing silence on the workers." *Noise*, 121. Maria O'Malley comments on the frequency in which Hawthorne's "women, no matter how vibrant, eventually fall silent." "Taking the Domestic View in Hawthorne's Fiction," *The New England Quarterly* 88 (2015): 657.

³³Benjamin Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1806), 165, 175. Michel Kronenwetter explains that Rush's *Enquiry* was initially given as a public address. *Capital Punishment: A Reference Handbook*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Contemporary World Issues, 2001), 180. The *Enquiry* was later reprinted in *Essays Literary, Moral and Philosophical*, from which I take my citations.

special cells for solitary confinement and prison directives incorporating silence as a part of inmates' daily schedules. Prisoners in the New York Auburn system, the model Hawthorne may have had in mind when he wrote *Seven Gables*, were allowed to congregate in the prison's open work areas, but were expected to labor silently.³⁴ William Crawford's 1834 review of penitentiaries in the United States warned, however, that even this labor model "inevitably" provided prisoners with "recourse to other modes of communication." For this reason, he recommended strict solitary confinement as "not only an exemplary punishment, but a powerful agent in the reformation of morals."³⁵ An 1826 report by the Boston Prison Discipline Society similarly justified solitary confinement's moral benefits, explaining that of all punishments, such isolation was "likely to lead . . . men to reflection and remorse."³⁶ Isolated from friends and family and kept in perpetual silence, it is no wonder that inmates would come to believe they were "literally buried from the world," as the Auburn warden informed prisoners in 1826.³⁷ Hawthorne would of course repeat this tomb-like imagery in *Seven Gables* when his own "long-buried man," Clifford, is finally "summoned forth from his living tomb" (21).

Both Hepzibah and Clifford thus come to experience, although in differing ways, sound's capacity to regulate their public and private lives in a mode destructive to their

³⁴Massachusetts State Prison was based on the Auburn system of punishment and employed a form of solitary confinement that "left the inmates alone and idle for long stretches of time" and even created a wing for "uninterrupted isolation." Caleb Smith, *The Prison and the American Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 63, 82.

³⁵William Crawford, *Report of William Crawford, Esq.: On the Penitentiaries of the United States* (London: Irish University Press, 1834), 41-42.

³⁶*First Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the Prison Discipline Society, Boston, June 2, 1826* (Boston: Perkins and Marvin, 1830), 7. For a "Sybarite" like Clifford, solitude was considered a particularly effective mode of punishment, or so the authors of the Boston report claimed: "If a man has been fond of society; if his mind has been cultivated; if his sensibility is acute; solitary confinement is a terrible punishment. If, on the contrary, the man is a mere animal . . . solitary confinement is much less severe than stripes." Compare *Seven Gables*, 95 to *First Annual Report*, 18.

³⁷Cited in Philip F. Gura's introduction to *Buried from the World: Inside the Massachusetts State Prison, 1829-1831* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2001), xi.

self-actualization. In the self-imposed prison of the cent-shop, Hepzibah may suffer from sound's excess, forced to listen to the dissonance and destabilizing noise of the marketplace that in turn reveals her own lack of autonomy, her silence within this sonic world. Her act of listening, however, is still generative, providing at least the semblance of aural connection. Her brother on the other hand arguably has faced a worse fate. While incarcerated, he abides in sound's absence. For thirty years Clifford has essentially lived as a mute in the "close prison-atmosphere," denied any meaningful auditory engagement with the world (189). Fittingly, Clifford's release also marks his reemergence into sound, however tentative it may be. On the night of his return to his ancestral home, Clifford's cousin Phoebe overhears the "murmur of an unknown voice," the sound of which was "strangely indistinct . . . less like articulate words than an unshaped sound." "So vague was it," the narrator clarifies, "that its impression or echo, in Phoebe's mind, was that of unreality" (84).

Clifford's voice, at least as Phoebe hears it, captures his liminal state as someone "unshaped" by his prison experience. Like his voice Clifford is a "material ghost" (92), "an indistinct shadow" of something that resembles, but does not become, "human utterance" (85). However, his reentry into aural, from the nothingness of silence to the "shadow," "murmur" and "echo" of sound, does at least confirm a hesitant return to life. As Mladen Dolar explains, "complete silence is . . . like death, while the voice is the first sign of life."³⁸ Although not one to "converse" with others, Clifford does indulge his auditory senses upon his release, surrounding himself with sound (119).³⁹ But finding Hepzibah's voice too "harsh"—a

³⁸"The Linguistics of the Voice" in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (New York: Routledge, 2012), 540. For studies on vocal expression in early America and the importance of orality/aurality, see Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Sandra Gustafson, *Eloquence Is Power: Oratory & Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³⁹Clifford's rehabilitation involves a kind of sound immersion therapy increasingly encouraged by mid-nineteenth-century prison reformers. George Combe warned that a

“kind of croak . . . as if the voice had been dyed black”—Clifford instead attaches to his young cousin whose “native gush and play of her spirit” makes her “especially necessary” to his rehabilitation. “[S]eldom perfectly quiet,” Phoebe eases Clifford’s “blighted” life through sound, reading and singing to him to pass the time. “So long as Phoebe sang,” the narrator explains, “Clifford was content” (116, 119, 120).

Hawthorne’s representation of sound’s therapeutic dimensions in these passages gestures toward what Walter Ong defines as the “interiorizing quality of sound and thus of voice.”⁴⁰ Unlike the printed word which merely encourages a reader to enter “into his or her own private reading world,” reading aloud maintains the “unity of the audience.” In this way it connects speaker and listener through the shared experience of sound, “manifest[ing] human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons.”⁴¹ Listening to Phoebe read tells Clifford little of what was contained within the literature itself for it is not the “pictures of life” or “scenes of passions” that interests him, but rather Phoebe herself (126). “He read Phoebe,” the narrator explains, “as he would a sweet and simple story; he listened to her, as if she were a verse of household poetry, which God, in requital of his bleak and dismal lot, had permitted some angel, that most pitied him, to warble through the house” (123). To Clifford’s ears at least, Phoebe’s voice discloses sound’s connection “to the ultimate concerns of existence,” offering proof of God’s recompense for Clifford’s “bleak and dismal lot” through its soothing tones.⁴²

Yet these quiet exchanges between cousins in the end recommend a form of sociality far different from the pressing silence

prisoner should not be kept in solitary confinement up to the “very day of his liberation,” but rather “advanced to greater and greater degrees of liberty, of self-regulation, and of social enjoyment.” “Letter from Mr. Combe to the Editor,” *The Phrenological Journal and Magazine of Moral Science* 16 (1843): 14-16. See also Janet Floyd, “Dislocations of the Self: Eliza Farnham at Sing Sing Prison,” *Journal of American Studies* 40 (2006): 311-25 at 313.

⁴⁰*The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 146.

⁴¹Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 72.

⁴²Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 72.

of Clifford's cell. Made sacred by her own "spiritual force," Phoebe's soundings effectively reshape Clifford's world, awakening within him "a perception, or a sympathy" that seemed to solidify his own "place . . . in the whole sympathetic chain of human nature" (119, 122-23). When read in this way, Clifford's imaginative translation of Phoebe's voice into text—his desire to read her as she reads and sings aloud to him—ultimately exposes what sound, unlike sight, could offer both Hawthorne and his readership: a type of sociality that preserves, as it reveals, "the deep interior and essentially private consciousness" of another.⁴³ Uniting in sympathy with the sounds around her, be they the "twittering gayety of the robins in the pear-tree" or the anguished "vague moan of" her cousin, Phoebe's voice offers a striking contrast to the ugly sounds and silences of the modern world that have controlled, and continue to control, her cousins' lives (119).

However, it is only when Clifford abandons the "unwholesome atmosphere" (224) of his ancestral home—a "silent and impenetrable mansion" that too closely resembles Clifford's earlier prison (250)—for the "rumble and tumult" of the train does his voice find full expression. Here, Clifford feels he has discovered "life itself" as he listens to the passengers' "peals of laughter" (220-21). To their cries Clifford's voice responds in turn. "For the first time in thirty years," he tells Hepzibah, "my thoughts gush up and find words ready for them. I must talk, and I will" (226). For Clifford, the railroad offers a brief respite from the social isolation of his past life, connecting him to the lives of others in its "inevitable movement onward" (221). Indeed its rapid speed provides evidence, like the telegraph, of how the "world of matter has become a great nerve, vibrating thousands of miles in a breathless point of time" (227). It embodies, to borrow from Paul Gilmore's

⁴³As Ong explains, oral communication allows us "to participate in" another's "inwardness as well as our own" but in a "noninterfering" way, unlike our other senses which are more transgressive in nature, "violat[ing] the interior" of others. *Presence of the Word*, 122, 125, 146. When Holgrave reads aloud to Phoebe, he reinforces this model of authorship by refusing to mesmerize her out of "reverence for another's individuality." Hawthorne, *House*, 182.

analysis of the “techno-utopian” discourse prominent in the era, the “very fluidity of the material and spiritual worlds.”⁴⁴ In Clifford’s assessment such technology is an “almost spiritual medium” that only “should be consecrated to high, deep, joyful, and holy missions.” Yet he is ultimately mistaken in his assessment of the railway’s “spiritual” power (227). What Clifford “imagines . . . as enabling one vast interconnected realm of private intimacy,” Gilmore writes of this passage, is ultimately destroyed by “its public uses.”⁴⁵ The train’s “hurried career” is, in the end, just a “dream.” Rather than lead Hepzibah and Clifford on a “holy” mission, its “whirlwind speed” instead takes them “nowhere” (219-20, 224). They disembark at a “solitary way-station” where, no longer supported by the “powerful excitement” of the modern world, Clifford’s verbosity returns to a “torpid and reluctant utterance” that soon subsides into silence. Only the “sullen wind” and Hepzibah’s fervent prayer break the quiet of the scene: “‘Oh God!’—ejaculated poor, gaunt Hepzibah,—then paused a moment to consider what her prayer should be—‘Oh God—our Father—are we not thy children? Have mercy on us!’” (228-29).

Does Hepzibah’s prayer go unheard? To the devout, religious practices like prayerful mediation and worship music had long “trained Christian ears” to hear spiritualized sounds, be it a call to ministry or the sound of “seraphic choirs” joining in a psalm.⁴⁶ The auditory dimension to these religious encounters advanced a definition of faith that described spiritual hearing as an internal, rather than external, sense. As William Graham remarks, such “hearing is not the external work of the ears, but the internal work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart.”⁴⁷ The “dissociative quality” of these conversion experiences—an “internal exchange with a voice that was within

⁴⁴*Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 21.

⁴⁵*Aesthetic Materialism*, 80.

⁴⁶Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 64.

⁴⁷*Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 150.

but also beyond the self”—was particularly evident in prayer.⁴⁸ Leigh Eric Schmidt offers, for instance, that prayer emphasizes “hearing’s capacity for . . . exchange,” a “potential participatory dynamism” whereby the “words of the speaker are conditioned by a listener and by the possibility of an answer.” In other words, in prayer, the devout (the “listening speaker”) and God (the “speaking listener”) exist in a state of “in-betweenness,” a “sort of doubling or entwining in which ‘one no longer knows who speaks and who listens.’”⁴⁹

In *Seven Gables*, Hepzibah’s act of prayer evokes this duality in the dashes that Hawthorne uses to frame her plea, incorporating silence, a kind of spiritual listening, into her prayer. She listens, in other words, as she speaks. In this way her pauses insist on an audience, though what or whom Hepzibah potentially hears remains unrecorded. Still, as Hawthorne writes, this “was no hour for disbelief” (229). In the relative quiet of the countryside, far removed from the modern world, Hepzibah’s prayer, even when posed as a question, becomes a spiritual affirmation of the siblings’ essential divinity, their claim to God’s protection. “Are we not thy children?” she asks (229).

Hawthorne turns to a similar kind of hallowed listening in the novel’s second chapter, “The Little Shop-Window.” Even though the title places emphasis on visibility and the public world of commodity consumption into which Hepzibah will soon enter, the chapter’s opening passages foreground a different type of sensory experience, one that begins with the narrator—a “disembodied listener”—following Hepzibah about her morning ritual. Out of respect for the sanctity of a “maiden lady’s toilet,” the narrator remains politely “at the threshold of her chamber,” only eavesdropping on the sound of her movements within this personal space. She opens and closes an “old-fashioned bureau . . . with difficulty” and anxiously “tread[s] . . . backward and forward . . . to-and-fro, across the chamber,” movement communicated through the sound of her “footsteps” and the “rustling of stiff silks.” These sounds clearly indicate

⁴⁸Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 54.

⁴⁹*Hearing Things*, 34-35.

Hepzibah's actions in a manner that may seem to mirror the public exposure Hepzibah experiences as a cent-shop huckster. In contrast to the intrusive aurality of the marketplace that comes later, Hawthorne sustains a reverential narrative silence, maintaining the semblance of privacy as Hepzibah completes her morning "devotions." "Our story must . . . await Miss Hepzibah," the narrator remarks, if she is to receive the respect she deserves (28-29).

To be sure, "this narrative strategy conflates character, narrator and reader," as Robert Friedman observes.⁵⁰ But the privatized listening it encourages also underscores how this act of eavesdropping, and the privilege it entails, requires the narrator to acknowledge his own role as a sympathetic sound-maker in the novel. He is essentially a "speaking listener," to return to Schmidt's definition of prayer's "in-betweenness," a ghost-like presence that narrates while quietly listening to Hepzibah's otherwise "inaudible" prayers. For it is only through a kind of absent presence that Hepzibah is heard at all:

Inaudible, consequently, were poor Miss Hepzibah's gusty sighs. Inaudible, the creaking joints of her stiffened knees, as she knelt down by the bedside. And inaudible, too, by mortal ear, but heard with all-comprehending love and pity in the farthest Heaven, that almost agony of prayer—now whispered, now a groan, now a struggling silence—wherewith she besought the Divine assistance through the day. (28)

Such sounds, so intensely private and full of anguish, carry with them sympathetic force. Inaudible to all but the "farthest Heaven," how can one but respond with similar feelings of "love and pity" to this "agony of prayer"?

Here then, in Hepzibah's moments of prayer, Hawthorne offers a competing aurality to the modern soundscape's depersonalizing force, one that confirms, rather than denies, Hepzibah and Clifford's right to selfhood. It is an intimate, and arguably sanctified, acoustic counterpoint to the disarming sounds of

⁵⁰Hawthorne's *Romances: Social Drama and the Metaphor of Geometry* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 98.

the modern world. The shop-bell's persistent ringing, the regular "rumble and jar" of the railways (223), and especially the long years of solitude imposed on Clifford, these technologies of sound compel Hepzibah and Clifford's subjugation in their insistence on the "impalpable Now" (129). For it is not just Hepzibah who, as an "enslaved spirit," "owed obedience" to a bell's ringing (38); Clifford too is "possess[ed]" by the locomotive's signal call, responding to its "peal . . . [w]ithout question or delay" (219). Such sounds exemplify what Karin Bijsterveld defines as "intrusive sounds," a "series of recurrent sounds" that "invade or threaten the existence of something or someone that is vulnerable or fragile."⁵¹ In contrast, Hepzibah's prayer—symbolizing a different type of possession—confirms her existence as one of God's children. It becomes, in essence, the "spiritual medium" whose "holy" mission it was to bring "tidings . . . from God" (227).



In Hepzibah's prayer, then, Hawthorne emphasizes what *Seven Gables* would come to define as sound's magnetic power, its ability to open "a kind of window or door-way into the spiritual world" (241). For Clifford, it is not just emergent technologies like the telegraph and railway that embody the spiritual transcendence Hepzibah's prayer evokes. Rather, as he tells an old gentleman on the train, "Mesmerism" too is one of the many "harbingers of a better era," capable of establishing "an enlightening mystical and magnetic contact with a higher spiritual reality" (226).⁵² "These rapping spirits, that little Phoebe told us of, the other day," he continues, "What are these but the messengers of the spiritual world, knocking at the door of substance?" (227). At the time of *Seven Gables'* publication,

⁵¹*Mechanical Sound: Technology, Culture, and Public Problems of Noise in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 44.

⁵²Bret Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 108. See also Robert Fuller's *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

American Spiritualism, along with the practice of animal magnetism, certainly had been established as a movement particularly attuned to the sounds emanating from the spectral world.⁵³ As early as 1841, Hawthorne had observed the prominence of Spiritualist thought, writing against the claim that mesmerism could “give insight into the mysteries of life beyond death.” In Hawthorne’s estimation sound’s magnetic potential was much harder to tap: for, as *The House of the Seven Gables* suggests, such hearing ultimately depended upon the listener’s ability to not mistake, or rather mishear, “the physical and material for the spiritual.”⁵⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, most Spiritualists had come to accept “that animal magnetism and, eventually and more specifically, trance states could provide access to the spirit realm.”⁵⁵ Charles Poyen, for example, introduced many Americans to animal magnetism and explained how Mesmer posited the existence of a “universal fluid” that connected—through “mutual influence”—“the heavenly bodies, the earth, and the animated beings.”⁵⁶ Mesmerism thus “opened new avenues for understanding life’s inner-spirituality” in a manner not unlike that espoused by the more liberal Protestants in Hawthorne’s day.⁵⁷ Both advocated the importance of an internalized sensory experience, a kind of second hearing, in order to achieve spiritual transcendence.⁵⁸ As mesmerist George Bush declared in 1847, “the vocal communication of angels and spirits with man

⁵³For a study on the association of mesmerism with Spiritualism, R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 7-16.

⁵⁴“The Letters, 1813-1843,” *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), 15:589.

⁵⁵Ann Taves, *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 166.

⁵⁶Introduction to the *Report on the Magnetic Experiments Made by the Commission of the Royal Academy of Medicine* (Boston: D. K. Hitchcock, 1836), lx.

⁵⁷Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 86.

⁵⁸Franz Anton Mesmer first observed in the late eighteenth century how sound was a “conductor of magnetism” capable of making the “emanations” of the magnetic fluid “more powerful.” Mesmer in fact used a piano, “sometimes [with] the sound of the voice or singing . . . added,” when practicing magnetism and claimed that sound

... [is] ... heard as the speech of the inner man ... independent of audible sounds.” This “law of spiritual acoustics,” he continued, “applies directly and unequivocally to the corresponding peculiarities of the magnetic condition.”⁵⁹ Chauncy Hare Townshend’s *Facts in Mesmerism*, widely read for its definitive description of Mesmer’s doctrine, came to a similar conclusion when he turned to sound as an example of how a medium can connect “mesmeric person with external objects,” describing the “conveyance of acoustic impulses” to be analogous to the diffusion of the magnetic fluid. Both processes, he explained, transmitted sensations—mesmeric or otherwise—“through obstacles ... unimpeded, unimpaired.”⁶⁰

These comparisons were naturally suggested by the science behind hearing, the way air and other media transmitted sound from one object to another through a series of vibratory pulsations. In his *Cyclopaedia*’s entry on “Sound,” a reference work Hawthorne borrowed from the Salem Athenaeum, Abraham Rees explained how the “small particles” of sound “move ... in a tremulous, undulating manner”—much like Mesmer’s fluid—through a medium like air to “the proper and immediate instruments of hearing.”⁶¹ Townshend, however, clarified that to activate these magnetic fluids, “the spirit or inner sense”

“accumulated, concentrated, and conveyed” the universal fluid. Poyen, *Report on Magnetic Experiments*, lxi, lix.

⁵⁹*Mesmer and Swedenborg; or, The Relation of the Developments of Mesmerism to the Doctrines and Disclosures of Swedenborg* (New York: John Allen, 1847), 133, 135. For a discussion on the importance of Swedenborg to nineteenth-century American Spiritualists, see Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 199–245.

⁶⁰*Facts in Mesmerism: With Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry Into It* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843), 264, 266, 267, 269.

⁶¹Rees explained, “we are made aware of the existence of distance bodies” through a “vibratory impulse” that is “brought into contact with our nervous system.” This “established language of sensation,” he concluded, provided a scientific framework for understanding mesmerism. “Sound,” *The Cyclopaedia: Or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and Literature* (London, 1819), 33:375. For similar influences on Hawthorne, see Marion L. Kesselring, *Hawthorne’s Reading, 1828–1850: A Transcription and Identification of Titles Recorded in the Charge-Books of the Salem Athenaeum* (Folcroft: Folcroft Press, 1969), 11. For more on the science of sound in early American discourse, see my article, “A Revolutionary Soundscape: Musical Reform and the Science of Sound in Early America, 1760–1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 35 (2015): 419–50.

must first be “relieved of its ordinary preoccupation with bodily functions,” including the sense of hearing. Only then could the medium be “temporarily free to enjoy sensations emanating from a more sublime level of reality.”⁶² In a mesmerized state, then, “the ear is closed and the eye is an abolished organ,” Townshend observed, at least to all but the “mesmerizer’s voice.”⁶³ Andrew Jackson Davis further defined this function of a medium, or one “through whom ‘sounds’ are made,” in *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* (1851), writing how “in the production of *true* spiritual sounds, their [the mediums’] systems may be regarded...as a receptacle . . . for the influx . . . of spirits.”⁶⁴

According to these accounts, then, mesmerism not only advocated, but in fact required mediums to submit passively to the will of another. In this way, practitioners of American spiritualism were “unique” for their willingness “to look to spirits as a surrogate spiritual presence.” Most other American religions at the time, as Bret Carroll observes, “considered the individual subject only to the authority of God and the divinely inspired conscience.”⁶⁵ Not all, however, were as comfortable with the idea of mediums submitting to a “higher power” that was merely “subdivine,” be it the spirits or the mesmerizer communicating through them.⁶⁶ Without denying the “real existence of spiritual personalities and powers,” Francis Sitwell, for instance, denounced mesmerism as a supernatural practice akin to “witchcraft” and other “unlawful arts” in *Mesmerism Considered*.⁶⁷

⁶² Fuller, *Mesmerism*, 41.

⁶³*Facts in Mesmerism*, 267. “The eye, as we have seen, yields first to the slumberous influence. Long after this organ has ceased to act, the hearing retains all its acuteness . . . but at length the ‘porches of the ear’ are closed . . . and the patient, though still alive to feeling, is dead to every sound save that of the mesmerizer’s voice” (102). For a similar description of the mesmerizing process which Hawthorne may have encountered, see “Animal Magnetism,” *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* 3 (1837): 87.

⁶⁴*The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1851), 46.

⁶⁵*Spiritualism*, 85, 116.

⁶⁶Carroll, *Spiritualism*, 116.

⁶⁷*Mesmerism Considered* (Glasgow: William Mackenzie, 1852), 5.

Of particular complaint was the trance-state, which “closed in overmastering sleep” the medium’s bodily senses and, by extension, “his will . . . the highest gift of God.”⁶⁸ If “in the Christian tradition, the senses were the inlets to body and soul,” then mesmerism’s suspension of sensory experience risked closing the medium off from God’s divine presence.⁶⁹ Such “evils,” as Sitwell further warned, were not temporary, but lasting. “There will be a permanent spiritual influence in exercise upon the victim,” he adamantly declared, “even when not in the mesmeric state or trance.” For this reason, the medium, as Sitwell noted elsewhere, was neither “a dead man, nor yet a living one . . . but a strange unnatural condition of both.”⁷⁰

Hawthorne advanced a similar critique when he warned Sophia in 1841 of the danger of “magnetic miracles,” writing, “Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies.” Even with these reservations, Hawthorne did not exclude the possibility of a divine-human encounter; as he assured Sophia, he had “no want of faith in mysteries.”⁷¹ Rather, as Hawthorne wrote later of a séance he attended while traveling abroad, “I should be glad to believe in the genuineness of these spirits, if I could” but the “whole matter seems to me a sort of dreaming awake,” though “there remains, of course, a great deal for which I cannot account.” His doubt, however, that these “spiritual sources” were only “effusions emanated from earthly minds” made him worry that the Spiritualist practices claiming to contact the spirit realm only dulled an individual’s

⁶⁸Sitwell further clarified, “This is the difference between possession by an evil spirit, and the gift and indwelling of the Holy Ghost. The evil spirit domineers over the man, irrespective of his consciousness and will. The Holy Ghost acts otherwise.” *Mesmerism Considered*, 5, 11, 12.

⁶⁹Schmidt, *Hearing Things*, 50.

⁷⁰Sitwell, *Mesmerism Considered*, 13; and *What is Mesmerism?: And What Its Concomitants, Clairvoyance and Necromancy* (London: Bosworth and Harrison, 1862), 31. *What is Mesmerism?* is a revision of his earlier *Mesmerism Considered*.

⁷¹Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1813-1843,” 588-89.

ability to listen to a more “genuine” celestial voice.⁷² “What delusion can be more lamentable and mischievous,” he asked Sophia, “than to mistake the physical and material for the spiritual? What so miserable as to lose the soul’s true . . . knowledge and consciousness of heaven in the mist of an earth-born vision?” Only by keeping the “imagination sane” and free from the “earthy effluence” of a magnetizer’s “corporeal system,” he advised her, could one hope to gain a proper “communion with Heaven.”⁷³

Although he entreated Sophia to “take no part in” mesmerism’s “strange science,” Hawthorne would return to mesmerism in *Seven Gables*, most prominently in a story narrated by Holgrave, the novel’s current dabbler in animal magnetism and primary daguerreotypist.⁷⁴ Holgrave’s tale recounts how the grandson of Colonel Pyncheon calls upon the young Matthew Maule to “convert the mind” of his daughter, Alice, “into a kind of telescopic medium, through which Mr. Pyncheon and himself might obtain a glimpse into the spiritual world,” hoping that their ancestors would reveal the location of missing deeds to Pyncheon land in Maine. Even though Maule succeeds in “holding an imperfect sort of intercourse” with the spirit realm through Alice’s “spiritualized perception,” he fails to gain knowledge of the missing documents. Still, Maule refuses to lift the hypnotic spell that binds Alice to him, instead condemning her to a “bondage more humiliating, a thousandfold, than that which binds its chain around the body”—a type of self-abnegation that Hawthorne warned Sophia of when he encouraged her to stay clear of mesmerism’s “magnetic miracles” (178, 180).

Hawthorne intends that we identify daguerreotypy as a form of mesmerism by associating the Maule family’s “strange power” (163) of vision with the “mesmerizing eye of the

⁷²Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The French and Italian Notebooks,” *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 14:398-99.

⁷³Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1813-1843,” 589.

⁷⁴Hawthorne, “The Letters, 1813-1843,” 589.

camera.”⁷⁵ Holgrave explains of daguerreotypy, “There is wonderful insight in Heaven’s broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it” (80).⁷⁶ But, as Holgrave informs Hepzibah earlier in the novel, this manipulation of light and shadow is in fact a “misuse” of “Heaven’s blessed sunshine”—language that recalls his ancestor’s own “misuse” of mesmerism as several recent scholars have noted (41). Indeed both pretend to access a kind of spiritual truth, however “imperfect” it may be, by violating the interiority of another, revealing in the process the “psychological power to dominate and control” that had so “frightened and fascinated Hawthorne.”⁷⁷

While certainly persuasive, such a reading privileges an ocularcentric understanding of Holgrave’s tale, despite its apparent investment in sound. Alice’s “admiring glance” (174) may inspire Maule to use the “witchcraft of [his] eye” (163) to “intrude” on her “holy of holies.” Even so, it is sound, a “grotesque . . . incantation,” that opens the spiritual realm to mortal inquiry (178). In Holgrave’s handling, this verbalized conjuring recalls the ancient “prophecy”—“God will give him blood to drink”—that the original Maule “uttered” against Colonel Pyncheon on the day of his execution (9). Both invoke through sound the presence of a spiritual authority that in turn refuses Colonel Pyncheon the right to speak. Even in death, Colonel Pyncheon’s spirit, as seen through Alice’s altered consciousness, is “choked” into silence by “his companions,” the Maules, who “pressed their hands over his mouth” in order to stop him from

⁷⁵Megan Williams, *Through the Negative: The Photographic Image and the Written Word in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30.

⁷⁶Presenting “the pictures as unmediated truth,” Holgrave “assumes the role of God.” Davidson, “Photographs,” 688. It was common for American ocular theories to describe the intricate “construction of the eye” as “evidence” of the “wisdom and goodness of God,” as the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge* reported in its November 1837 issue (56-57). See also Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 48.

⁷⁷Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*, 92.

“shouting forth the secret.” As Maule informs Alice’s father, “The custody of this secret . . . makes part of your grandfather’s retribution” (178-79).⁷⁸ Her father soon realizes that Alice too will become part of this “retribution” for her mesmeric trance imposes a selective deafness that prohibits her from engaging with the mortal realm.

Through sound, and not sight, Alice experiences the “evil potency” of Maule’s power (175). Her “dismal shriek,” a “call for help” that “long re-echoed” in her father’s “heart,” announces her reluctant submission to Maule’s psychic control.⁷⁹ This “half-uttered exclamation,” as Holgrave explains, “was very faint and low; so indistinct, that there seemed but half a will to shape out the words, and too undefined a purport, to be intelligible.” Alice’s cry ultimately foretells a future devoid of any meaningful acoustic engagement with the world for, like Clifford, Alice too will be required to live in a kind of enforced solitude as her father soon discovers: “‘Alice! Awake!’ cried her father . . . with terror in his voice. . . . But the sound evidently reached her not.” Not even prayer can protect Alice from Maule’s “grotesque and fantastic bidding.” Even while “worshipping at church,” as Holgrave informs Phoebe, does she remain deaf to all but Maule’s commanding voice (176, 177, 180). Her once “sweet and harp-like voice” thus made “indistinct” by the sheer force of Maule’s mesmeric power, the enchanted Alice lives only half a life, isolated from society just

⁷⁸On the similarities between these two mystical speech acts, “Where the original Maule repudiated his own agency, attributing the power of restorative justice to God, his descendent is involved in the . . . assertion of a self-interested will.” Caleb Smith, *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 123. As a prophet, the original Maule practices a form of self-abnegation when he becomes a “spokesman for the holy word,” as defined by David Chidester’s *Word and Light: Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Discourse* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 39. According to Holgrave, the younger Maule requires another to fulfill this role and thus forces Alice to repudiate her agency in order to gain access to the spirit world.

⁷⁹Connor offers a useful analysis of demonic possession and the voice applicable to my reading of this scene. “The voice is central to possession as evidence of a transformation of the forms and energies of the body, far more effective than any number of mutely physical symptoms,” reasoning that “this is perhaps because the voice is always anyway fundamentally itself on the border between the body and what is not body.” *Dumbstruck*, 113.

as Clifford would be for thirty years. And like Clifford, Alice too will become “a material ghost,” enduring a “strange unnatural condition,” to return to Sitwell’s language, as someone not quite “dead . . . nor living.”⁸⁰

Only on the day of her death does Alice awake from this “enchanted sleep.” On this day, with “wasted form” and “hectic cheek,” Alice returns to sound, filling “the house with music! Music, in which a strain of the heavenly choristers was echoed!” (181). Her initial “call for help” may have gone unanswered, both by her father who ignored her whispered plea and by the “Almighty Father” who elected not to intercede on her behalf (229). Still, Alice’s final performance on the harpsichord suggests an end to this spiritual silence, an ecstatic dialogue of “heavenly” and earthly sounds that grants her a kind of retributive justice, or so the larger narrative implies. Alice may die, but her music will live on to “haunt the House of Seven Gables.” As legend has it, these “ghostly harmonies” were “prelusive of a death in the family” (74, 194). The generations to come will be forced to listen, as Alice once was, to sounds from the spirit world, all-the-while aware that the “mournful” music they hear, like Alice’s “dismal shriek,” portends their imminent death (74).

Even more than Maule’s “grotesque . . . incantation,” Alice’s music comes to resemble the original Maule’s “prophecy” for both are “echo[es] of a distant voice” warning of a coming death.⁸¹ Hawthorne makes this comparison clear on the day Judge Pyncheon is fated to die. That morning, Hepzibah hears “a note of music,” a “sweet, airy, and delicate, though most melancholy” sound that reminds her of the “legendary Alice” and her “spiritual fingers.” Alice’s spectral music, however, is interrupted by the “ringing of the shop-bell,” a “dissonance” made that much more “vulgar” by a sound that follows—“neither a

⁸⁰*What is Mesmerism?*, 31.

⁸¹Prophetic experience “involved the descent of divine influences upon the prophet from God, the impact of the voice of God upon the relatively passive prophet.” Prophetic speech was akin to a medium’s magnetic soundings of the spiritual world but with a crucial difference: a true prophet, unlike a medium, remained untainted by the magnetizer’s “earthly effluence.” Chidester, *Word and Light*, 39, 40.

cough nor a hem, but a kind of rumbling and reverberating spasm in somebody's capacious depth of chest." This "characteristic sound" (193-94), as Hepzibah correctly suspects, belongs to the judge who has come to the house of the seven gables to gain knowledge, as his ancestor once did, of legal documents to "missing [Pyncheon] property." Believing that Clifford knows the location of this "hidden wealth," the judge demands an interview with Hepzibah's brother, threatening to have him committed to "a public asylum"—to return him to a living tomb—if Clifford "refuse[s] . . . the information." In the face of this threat, Hepzibah reluctantly agrees to summon Clifford, but not before warning the judge that God's providence "will not let you do the thing you meditate!" (202-4).

In the passages that follow, Hawthorne brings the "good and evil fortunes of the Pyncheons" to a head through a series of aurally dense scenes that dramatize the supernatural manifestations that the original prophecy, the subsequent incantation, and Alice's spectral music all evoke. First, Hepzibah hears "some sound" she imagines coming from the Judge, finding in its tone a "relenting impulse" (206). Discovering herself mistaken, yet not identifying the source of the voice, Hepzibah continues on to Clifford's chamber where, in the passage just outside his door, her courage waivers, and she considers sending forth a "shriek" full of "strange agony"—a "cry of a human soul, at some dreadful crisis" that would communicate to those outside the seven gabled house her need for "rescue." But worried that the "Judge would draw all human aid to his own behalf," Hepzibah resists this aural urge. With no mortal friend to offer aid in her time of need, the "poor, dim-sighted Hepzibah" once again turns to "prayer" (209, 210). Though "her faith was . . . weak" and she feared that "Providence intermeddled not in these petty wrongs," this prayer—a spiritual call for help—receives an answer, but not from some divine voice thundering down from Heaven. What Hepzibah hears, what answers her prayer, is silence.

First knocking "feebly" on her brother's door, Hepzibah receives "no reply." Her second and third attempts are no more successful, and even her verbal call to Clifford is met with

“silence” (211). Finding Clifford in neither chamber nor garden, Hepzibah hastily returns to the parlor where she thrice calls for the judge to help her find her brother: “‘Do you hear me, Jaffrey Pyncheon?’ screamed Hepzibah” on her third attempt. This loud cry, still unanswered, summons the presence of her brother, who, with a face “preternaturally pale,” gestures her into the parlor. With her sight still occluded by the darkness of the room, Hepzibah crosses the threshold and finally discovers the reason for the judge’s silence. In her absence, the judge had “perished in the midst of . . . [his] wickedness” (214-17). There, in the “dim, thick, stifling atmosphere” of the parlor, Hepzibah, Clifford, and, at least for a little while, the narrator leave him. “Let him be quiet!” Clifford exclaims, for “What can he do better?” (215).

His once “deep voice” now permanently silenced, Judge Pyncheon is in death subjected to a reversal of fortune that, like his ancestors before him, refuses his right to speech (102).⁸² Although his untimely death later is confirmed by Holgrave to be natural, still the soundscape Hawthorne initially employs to frame the judge’s passing indicates another type of agency, that of a supernatural power claiming retribution for the “wickedness” of the judge’s life. From the first “mysterious notes” announcing the judge’s arrival (194) to the unidentified “sound” Hepzibah hears when she leaves the judge to summon her brother, these “sourceless voices” seem to emanate from beyond the earthly realm.⁸³ They become the “spiritual mediums,” to return to Clifford’s description on the train and Hepzibah’s subsequent prayer, that communicate God’s tidings.

In this way, Hawthorne again accentuates sound’s function as a regulatory power, although this time it is a divine

⁸²In this way, the judge faces a fate similar to Clifford’s incarceration. The armchair in which the judge has died also resembles the “tranquilizing chair” sometimes used in American penitentiary systems as a complement to solitary confinement. Anne-Marie Cusac, *Cruel and Unusual: The Culture of Punishment in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 48.

⁸³Connor further notes how “religions often speak of the invisibility of the divine principle, but hardly ever of his/her inaudibility.” *Dumbstruck*, 24.

authority and not the modern marketplace that “compels silence.” Nowhere is this silencing made more apparent than when the narrator finally returns to Judge Pyncheon’s corpse in the chapter entitled “Governor Pyncheon.” Here, Hawthorne offers an extended meditation on the judge’s uncharacteristic silence, observing how his “profound” sleep may suggest peace of mind—a “quietude of conscience”—but for a single sound, the “ticking of his watch” (230).⁸⁴ In its repeated and rhythmic soundings, the judge’s timepiece creates an *ostinato* effect in the chapter.⁸⁵ In musical parlance, an *ostinato* “is neither stable nor dynamic”; it “creates small-scale motion” while preventing “any large harmonic movement” from occurring.⁸⁶ If left unabated, its static drone gives the impression of suspending time—just as the judge is caught in time as the world progresses around him. This stasis, however, also evokes internal continuity for the *ostinato* effect is not simply heard as a series of distinct tones, but rather as a “sequence of . . . successive moments . . . held together in memory and anticipation”—a kind of haunting of all that has come before.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Mike O’Mally explains how “the clock . . . never represents the *source* of time. Rather, it serves only as an embodiment of . . . our ability to comprehend nature and natural laws” that, in turn, “provide clues to the mind of God and . . . to the proper management of time as God intended it.” Early American folklore for this reason identified timepieces to be a “portent of death,” a “‘reckoning . . . toward eternity.’” The watch’s ticking thus emphasizes a kind of internalized prophetic speech that reveals God’s commands. *Keeping Watch: A History of American Time* (New York: Viking, 1990), 15, 33. See also, Ralph Wilburn, *The Prophetic Voice in Protestant Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 143.

⁸⁵The *Harvard Dictionary of Music* explains that the “ostinato differs from other devices of repetition, such as imitation and sequence . . . in that it is reiterated in the same voice and usually at the same pitch. It is this feature of ‘persistent’ repeat that accounts for the name.” Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 634.

⁸⁶Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 47.

⁸⁷Rée, *I See a Voice*, 352. In his introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, Charles Bernstein offers a non-musical term—i.e., a “sonic afterimage”—that could describe this ostinato effect in his discussion of reading poetry aloud: “PERFORMANCE readily allows FOR stressing . . . unstressed syllables . . . creating SYNCOPATED RHYTHMS, WHICH, ONCE HEARD are THEN CARRIED over by readers INTO their OWN READING of the TEXT.” Even if disrupted, he further relates, this “prior pattern continues on underneath as a sort of sonic afterimage, creating a densely layered, or braided, or chordal texture” (15, use of small caps in original).

In this chapter, Hawthorne similarly brings together the novel's various auralities, summoning a series of ghostly sounds that "sing, and sigh, and sob, and shriek" around the judge's corpse:

But listen! That puff of the breeze was louder. The wind has veered about . . . The old house creaks again, and makes a vociferous but somewhat unintelligible bellowing in its sooty throat . . . A rumbling kind of bluster roars behind the fire-board. . . . [Footsteps] tread along the entries . . . and rustle up and down the staircases, as with silks miraculously stiff . . . Would that we were not an attendant spirit here! It is too awful! (238)

These sounds descend upon the haunted house of the seven gables (242) in what can only be termed a "prophetic scene"—a "scene in which the normally separated series of time past, time present, and time future is . . . concentrated into one incandescent moment of presence."⁸⁸ On the day the original Maule's prophecy is realized, the chimney similarly "belch[ed] forth its kitchen smoke" (11). So too were footsteps heard when the lieutenant governor, "with . . . a tramp of his ponderous riding-boots," tries to awaken Colonel Pyncheon from his seeming slumber. There is also "a sudden gust of wind that passed, as with a loud sigh, . . . [that] rustled the silken garments of the ladies" and a "shriek" when the Colonel's grandson discovers his body (14-15). The audile repetition in the later "Governor Pyncheon" chapter thus reinforces the cyclic nature of the Pyncheon family's long-standing conflict, aurally revealing how the "wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones" (4). Indeed the passage not only aurally recalls the day Colonel Pyncheon died, but also the spiritual soundings that followed, from the "rustling" sound of Hepzibah's skirt as she sought strength to meet the day to the haunting "shriek" of Alice's cry.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 66.

⁸⁹ Andrew Piper offers the term "polyphonic narrative performance" to represent a similar occurrence, or when the "act of speech [in a text] points not only to preexisting common knowledge but also to the reuse of this act of speech itself." *Dreaming in Books*, 79.

These sounds are thus the echoes of past wrongs, of a justice finally realized. For when the judge's timepiece finally ceases to tick, he remains forever silent in his "tomblike seclusion" with only the sound of a "buzzing" fly—a foreboding omen of the reckoning to come—and the ringing of the "shop-bell" to break the solitude of the scene (243).⁹⁰ In summoning the vestiges of the past, Hawthorne aurally interweaves past and present—connecting a "bygone time with the very present that is flitting away"—that promises, at least in the novel's conclusion, a brighter future for those who remain (4). In the novel's final passages, the narrator may acknowledge how "no great mistake . . . in our mortal sphere, is ever really set right" (269). Still, Hawthorne does aurally suggest a "higher" hope for the world beyond. Uncle Venner, passing by the house of seven gables on his way to reunite with his friends, hears a "strain of music" and "fancied that sweet Alice Pyncheon—after witnessing these deeds, this by-gone woe and this present happiness, of her kindred mortals—had given one farewell touch of spirit's joy upon her harpsichord, as she floated heavenward from the House of the Seven Gables" (274). In this sounding, Hawthorne locates what his *American Journals* first identified as the "spiritual potency" of sound, an "ethereal power" capable of alleviating the jarring and destabilizing noise of the modern world: a mournful "gift of song" in which "we recognize the voice of the Creator as distinctly as in the loudest accents of His thunder" (120).⁹¹

With Alice's music, Hawthorne's novel comes to a close as the seven gabled house, now devoid of mortal man and ethereal spirit, falls silent. In this "solitude" Hawthorne leaves the reader to reflect on the "coming fortunes of Hepzibah, and Clifford, and the descendent of the legendary wizard, and the village-maiden." All that is left to overhear are the final echoes of

⁹⁰Hawthorne initially describes the sound of the fly in his *American Notebooks* as "gladsome" and "sunny" but quickly corrects his assessment, suggesting that the fly—"the most impertinent and indelicate thing in creation"—is the reincarnation of "human spirits" who have lived a "troublesome and vexatious" life (246).

⁹¹"American Notebooks," 247. In the *Seven Gables* quotation, Hawthorne is referencing Phoebe's "strain of music," her "gift of song" (120); however, the novel associates Phoebe with Alice in their shared musical proclivities and potential as mediums.

Alice's "spirit's joy" and the "whispered . . . prophecies" that accompany her as she makes her way toward heaven. These spiritual soundings, however "slight, delicate, and evanescent" they may be, clearly speak of the "will of Providence"—but only if one takes the time to listen (274).

Rebecca Bechtold is an assistant professor of English at Wichita State University.