

## 1 Impossible Voices

Since the age of the Gothic romance, which found its genesis in the mid-eighteenth century, disembodied, monstrous or uncanny voices have populated the soundworlds of literatures of terror and horror to this day. Such voices, in modern and contemporary times, have proliferated, too, in trans-media forms, including in radio, television, film and podcasting. In this Element, I suggest that several distinctive categories of representation of voice echo across Gothic texts. In so doing, I argue for an aesthetics of the voice and for the critical value of exploring and pursuing a new category – perhaps even subgenre – in Gothic studies that I term ‘vococentric Gothic’. Essentially, vococentric Gothic is an auditory experience; if we listen attentively to Gothic texts, even literature, we realise that the voice can often take precedence over visual Gothic motifs. The importance of the Gothic soundworld to creating its signature atmospheres of suspense, terror or horror is understood by critics and audiences of the mode alike: creaking floorboards, howling winds and thunder rolling are just some of the acoustic motifs that alert us to a Gothic atmosphere. Vococentric Gothic, as I understand it, refers to the moments in Gothic fictions when the voice produces sublimity, terror, horror, awe, mystery, seduction and more.

To date, a number of prominent Gothic texts have received a good deal of scholarly attention in terms of their varied (and often haunting) representations of orality, including Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale* (1798), the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe, George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894), Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera* (1910) and Vernon Lee’s ‘A Wicked Voice’ (1890).<sup>1</sup> A standout example of a nineteenth-century vococentric Gothic short story, Lee’s rich narrative alerts us to the voice’s role in art; its relationship to music; its function as muse and artistic inspiration; as well as the thematic, aesthetic and gendered ramifications of a castrato’s ‘queer’ voice that haunts the narrator Magnus. The voice is a stain: an unwanted corruption of music and art that is nevertheless impossible to resist. Patricia Pulham’s reading of ‘A Wicked Voice’ demonstrates the ways in which Lee’s writing, with its persistent concerns of voice, music and the word, connects to psychoanalytic understandings of feminine

<sup>1</sup> I turn to such studies of Brockden Brown and Poe in the sections that follow. For a reading of the ‘object voice’ in *The Phantom of the Opera*, see Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 114. For a fascinating account of the titular *Trilby* as a ‘singing machine’, see Fiona Coll, ‘“Just a Singing-Machine”: The Making of an Automaton in George du Maurier’s *Trilby*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79:2 (Spring 2010): 742–63. The title of Mladen Dolar’s influential study *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006) is a quotation from Du Maurier’s novel.

writing in which ‘perhaps the voice’s most threatening quality is its androgyny, for it is this hybridity which links its power to the threatening female voices of the past’.<sup>2</sup> ‘A Wicked Voice’, then, is a tale of excess and decadence in which the voice threatens established orders in a multitude of ways. The story’s exuberant and multifaceted representation of the voice as persecutory, as an object of beauty and as an object of obsession speaks to a fundamental power of voice to metamorphosise and to engage our fears and desire in myriad guises. If narrative voice shapes the world we encounter, audible voices may penetrate this world’s integrity, signifying change and, often in the Gothic and horror, creating disjuncture and conflict. To think of the voice in its fullest sense is to give in to this simultaneity of representation. The voice can be ‘infernal’ in one instant and in the next it may metamorphose into a melodic object of beauty: ‘breaking itself in a shower of little scales and cadences and trills’.<sup>3</sup> From the nineteenth-century Gothic to modern and contemporary horrors, hybridity is one of the markers of the vococentric Gothic aesthetic across media.

### 1.1 Gothic Voices

Vococentric Gothic may be a new conceptual category for Gothic studies to attend to, but the practice of reading the voice’s role in Gothic texts is already well underway. Jimmy Packham’s *Gothic Utterance: Voice, Speech and Death in the American Gothic* (2021) provides the most extensive study in this area to date. In the only monograph published on the subject so far, Packham considers Gothic voices as they appear in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American Gothic. His argument reads a series of uncanny and disorderly voices that, in their alterity and in their various demands to be listened to, provoke a reshaping of boundaries between self and other, national identity and the human and technology in the fictions of an emerging American nation. By focusing on the ‘reception’ of Gothic voices in American culture, Packham argues persuasively for the ‘absolute centrality of the voice and its utterances to the American Gothic tradition’ as well as to the ‘the literary project of America during its first century’.<sup>4</sup> Packham’s carefully historicised and sustained reading of Gothicised orality in the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Louisa May Alcott, Mary E Wilkins Freeman, Herman Melville and others opens up the possibility for a new field of Gothic studies to emerge. Packham

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Pulham, ‘The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee’s Wicked Voices’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30:2 (2002): 421–37 (p. 431).

<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, eds. Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Jimmy Packham, *Gothic Utterance: Voice, Speech and Death in the American Gothic* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2021), p. 3.

reads Gothic voices as agents of transformation whereby voices of the dead or marginalised populaces can challenge and unpick ‘easy or superficial distinctions between selves and their Others’ in a series of representations that are ‘invested in the promise . . . to reinvent and reimagine prevailing relations, hierarchies, modes of being and so on’.<sup>5</sup> Packham’s study, then, already implies that listening to the soundworld of the Gothic novel reveals it to be a vococentric mode.

One of the central ambitions of this Element is to demonstrate that vococentric Gothic operates beyond those Gothic texts that most obviously treat the voice as a mastertrope and as a sustained narrative concern. Vococentric Gothic, I suggest, encapsulates shorter narrative episodes, too, where the voice momentarily takes precedence, particularly when it is represented as disembodied, hybrid or ventriloquised. This rule holds for even the most excessive and visually grotesque of Gothic horrors, such as those moments of excess in William Peter Blatty’s *The Exorcist* (1971), during which Regan MacNeil’s voice becomes the monstrous auditory: a hybrid of human, demon and animal noises.<sup>6</sup> As we witness in William Friedkin’s (1973) adaptation of Peter Blatty’s novel, the demon Pazuzu’s assault upon Regan’s body is multitudinous, her weeping sores, varicose veins and sickly pallor all suggesting the decay and destruction of her flesh into something monstrous.<sup>7</sup> But her possession presents, too, an extreme and excessive version of a ventriloquial and demonic voice speaking through its young host. In Gothic and horror films, such monstrous (and hybrid) voices do not always sound from as clear a source; the voice can be produced offstage as it emanates from a mysterious ‘other’ place, which lies beyond the sight afforded to the viewer. This is the dynamic foregrounded often in theory-driven readings of the voice, particularly in Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek’s readings of Norma Bates’s acousmatic voice presentation in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). In pursuing their psychoanalytically informed accounts, Žižek and Dolar draw from the work of the aesthetic theories of Michel Chion, who,<sup>8</sup> in formulating his concepts of the acousmètre and acousmatic voice in film, introduces the idea of ‘vococentric’ cinema as ‘the privilege accorded to the voice over all other sonic elements’ in audiovisual media. In his introduction to *The Voice in Cinema* (1999), Chion further argues that ‘Speech, shouts, sighs or whispers, the voice hierarchises everything around it.’<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Packham, *Gothic Utterance*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> William Peter Blatty, *The Exorcist* (London: Corgi, 2007), pp. 125–6.

<sup>7</sup> *The Exorcist*, dir. William Friedkin (United States: Hoya Productions, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, pp. 60–2.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 6.

Articulation therefore creates an order, so to speak, by its very production by distinguishing itself from ambient sound as the bearer of some message or communication. Chion refers to film narration. Gothic vococentrism locates the voice as a privileged object, too – one that often penetrates and sounds through a suspenseful Gothic atmosphere.

In current scholarship, there is little consideration of the intertextual dimensions to Gothic voices and to the larger soundworld their textual connections create; instead, their representations are traced more readily to authorial or technological contexts and concerns. Recent work in the field of sonic Gothic, which reads primarily the literary aesthetic, has explored the acoustics of particular Gothic romances,<sup>10</sup> the short stories of Poe and the soundscape of the Victorian Gothic.<sup>11</sup> However elucidating their findings may be, this series of critical readings is often not explicitly connected to the development of the Gothic mode itself, and none provide an overarching account of vococentric Gothic from the Romantic period to the present. Much of the work to date on Victorian Gothic soundscapes, for instance, characterises the terror fiction of the period as responding to a supposedly disconcerting series of changes in listening cultures and technologies, from the invention of the telegraph to the telephone and the phonograph. Yet, as John Picker argues with regard to the emergence of the phonograph in the late nineteenth century, the ‘mechanical reproduction of voice ... offered forms of control and interaction that late Victorians initially found not impersonal and fearful as moderns often did, but, in a period of diminishing mastery over empire and the self, individualized, reassuring and even desirable’.<sup>12</sup> Even as they acknowledge the nuances of historical context, as Picker’s argument does with great care, critical accounts of the disembodied, spectral or technologised voices of the period overlook that these Victorian oralities reiterate an aestheticisation of the voice foundational to the first Gothic romances published in the eighteenth century. When asked, in 1888, to record a piece on Thomas Edison’s ‘perfected’ phonograph for George

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Weisse, ‘The Object Voice in Romantic Irish Novels’, in Jorge Sacido-Romero and Sylvia Mieszkowski (eds.), *Sound Effects: The Object Voice in Fiction* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 47–71; Joan Passey, ‘The Aesthetics of the Auditory: Sound and Silence in the Novels of Ann Radcliffe’, *Horror Studies* 7:2 (2016): 189–204; Angela M. Archambault, ‘The Function of Sound in the Gothic Novels of Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin’, *Études Épistémè* 29 (June 2016), <http://journals.openedition.org/episteme/965> [last accessed 11 April 2021].

<sup>11</sup> See Fred Botting, ‘Poe, Voice, and the Origin of Horror Fiction’, in Jorge Sacido-Romero and Sylvia Mieszkowski (eds.), *Sound Effects: The Object Voice in Fiction* (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2015), pp. 73–100; Frances Clarke, ‘Gothic Vibrations and Edgar Allan Poe’, *Horror Studies* 7:2 (2016): 205–17. See Kristie A. Schlauraff, ‘Victorian Gothic Soundscapes’, *Literature Compass* 15:4 (2018), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lic3.12445> [last accessed 17 April 2021].

<sup>12</sup> John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 113.

Edward Gouraud's collection of recordings, the great Shakespearean actor Henry Irving, who was accompanied by his manager Bram Stoker at the time and would go on to be an inspiration for Count Dracula, chose to recite part of Matthew Gregory Lewis's Gothic monodrama *The Captive* (1803). Picker notes that '[i]n his choice of this scene for recitation, Irving intuitively gestured to the as yet unexplored way the phonograph would become a prison-house for spoken language'.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Irving's 'intuition' sensed the shared fascination that visitors to Gouraud's library would have for technologised Gothic voices. The relevance of the received, and not just the modern Victorian, Gothic to these nineteenth-century experiences of technology should not be overlooked. Furthermore, nineteenth-century audiences would have been familiar, too, with other forms of uncanny voices through their encounters with the practice and performance of ventriloquism; these are uncanny voices that the human body could produce without technological enhancement.

## 1.2 Ventriloquism

The few critical examinations published so far that explore the influence of the *act* of ventriloquism upon anglophone nineteenth-century Gothic literature all resist this temptation to frame the voice as primarily phonographic, telephonic or technologised. Produced by skilled and natural means, distant voice ventriloquism was an important and popular strand to late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theatre and literature. The ventriloquist would 'throw' their voice offstage, or into props, creating the illusion of a conversation. This technique was clearly of interest to writers of the supernatural. Distant voice ventriloquism was discussed by Sir Walter Scott in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830); it was also alluded to, and appropriated by, Poe in his short fiction, explicitly so in his late detective story 'Thou Art the Man' (1844), which I read at more length in Section 3. Scott, too, was acquainted with the world-famous ventriloquist Alexandre Vattemare, who visited him at Abbotsford and to whom he wrote a dedicatory epigram, while Poe attended the ventriloquist shows of Signor Blitz in Philadelphia and would most likely have read David Brewster's response to Scott's letters that explores the 'natural magic' of ventriloquism in even more detail.<sup>14</sup> Ventriloquism forms part of a nineteenth-century aural culture of entertainment – a wider culture that writers such as Charles Dickens, who toured relentlessly, actively participated in through performances and readings of their writing. Even if we cannot be certain that

<sup>13</sup> Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sweeney, 'Echoes of Ventriloquism in Poe's Tales', *Poe Studies: History, Theory, Interpretation* 54:1 (2021): 127–55 (p. 130).

Dickens attended ventriloquist shows, he would almost certainly have been aware of them and the popular literature that they spawned, such as Henry Cockton's *The Life and Adventures of Valentine Vox, the Ventriloquist* (1839).

The practice of ventriloquism is particularly open for Gothicisation as it decouples any socially pervasive understanding that one's voice is a marker of coherent subjectivity; it also denaturalises the relationship between the voice and the space from which it emanates. This Gothicisation of voice throwing is evident in Brewster's repost to Scott, in which he provides an account of mischievous trickery undertaken in a Parisian convent by the ventriloquist Saint-Gille. Drawing his account from Jean-Baptiste de la Chapelle's late eighteenth-century history of the art form, *Le ventriloque, ou l'engastrimythe* (1772), Brewster writes that Saint-Gille

had occasion to shelter himself from a storm in a neighbouring convent, where the monks were in deep mourning for a much-esteemed member of their community who had been recently buried. While lamenting over the tomb of their deceased brother the slight honours which had been paid to his memory, a voice was suddenly heard to issue from the roof of the choir bewailing the condition of the deceased in purgatory, and reproving the brotherhood for their want of zeal . . . the whole convent fell upon their faces, and vowed to make a reparation of their error. They accordingly chanted in full choir a *De Profundis*, during the intervals of which the spirit of the departed monk expressed his satisfaction at their pious exercises.<sup>15</sup>

This account of vocal deception certainly wears the clothes of an eighteenth-century Gothic narrative: a nunnery, death, monastic dedication and the solemn chanting of *De Profundis* are all present, to name but a few of the motifs that would become associated with the British Gothic romance that are on display in Brewster's telling. Yet, Saint-Gille's voice throwing, which mocks rather than scares, can be considered a truly Gothic act in only one way: he mimics the dead. In establishing its Gothic connotations, the setting of this voice-throwing vignette is just as important, perhaps more so than Saint-Gille's ventriloquial act. What this passage draws stark attention to, however, is that disembodied and acousmatic voices *demand* action from their listeners, and that they carry something suggestive of a supernatural power. These Gothic voices disorientate as they disrupt space, emanating often from obscured sources, which are often assumed to be associated with divine power.

Mirroring the tale of Saint-Gille, the Gothic's recurring depictions of disembodied voices are tied often to its architecture of place. Distant voices call from occluded or forbidden spaces: attics, basements, prisons, subterranean vaults

<sup>15</sup> David Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic: Addressed to Sir Walter Scott* (London: John Murray, 1834), p. 172.

and so on. As Steven Connor has suggested, the voice ‘inhabits and occupies space; and it also actively procures space for itself’, its demands and calls seeking to locate a listener and to be heard. Elaborating, Connor advocates for new conceptualisations of what he terms ‘vocalic space’ – a way of framing these relationships – where ‘the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact the different relations between the body, community, time, and divinity’.<sup>16</sup> The Gothic not only takes advantage of the voice’s relationship to space – the way in which it can extend the power of its speaker – but we might also say that it creates vocalic atmospheres, through its recurring representations of acoustic motifs of balladry, chanting and disembodied voices. The contradictions of reading voice as space are as important as they are disorientating; the effects of acts of ventriloquism rely upon a spatial deficit between the aural sense and sight. As Connor argues, ventriloquism has ‘an active and a passive form, depending upon whether it is thought of as the power to speak through others or as the experience of being spoken through by others’.<sup>17</sup> In vococentric Gothic, we find that ventriloquism takes often a passive form in figures of possession; only more rarely do characters engage in sustained trickery via aural deception, such as in the figure of the bilquist Carwin in *Wieland*. While Connor’s study makes clear that the history of ventriloquism is complex and multifaceted, very little reference is made to its influence upon Gothic fiction. Clearly, there are Gothic acts of ventriloquism that are represented in literature from its earliest novels, but it is the second of Connor’s categories that has wider significance for the Gothic. Being ‘spoken through by others’ is the essence of Gothic representations of possession, madness and the mediumship of ghosts.

### 1.3 Transformative Listening

In subsequent sections, my argument will often be concerned with reading vococentric Gothic as a literature of excess in its many representations of guttural or pre-symbolic voices, but an important function of the uncanny voice, particularly in ghost stories, is that it can be radical and transformative while still being articulate. Published first in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant’s vococentric Gothic tale ‘The Open Door’ (1882) presents an opening up to spectrality – a speaking with the ghost – that is transformative to the living *and* the dead. In Oliphant’s tale, speaking with the apparition challenges and recasts pervasive ‘modern’ belief systems borne out of the Scottish Enlightenment. The story demonstrates the

<sup>16</sup> Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 12–3.

<sup>17</sup> Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 14.

power of listening attentively to the Gothic voice. The tale's first-person narrator, Colonel Mortimer, is a disciple of middle-class, professional and Enlightened thought who patently believes in the primacy of rationalisation; nevertheless, he comes to learn from his son Roland that the ghostly can be attended to in a way that not merely challenges but expands his ontological belief system.<sup>18</sup> Roland's name is of heroic stature and he is consistently feminised; this is a productive femininity that his father comes to adopt. As such, Enlightenment masculinity is dislocated from patriarchal belief systems and this transformation is achieved through attentive modes of listening. After travelling to the ruins where his son first heard a spectral voice, Mortimer discovers a 'spirit in pain – if it was a spirit' that is recognised as an oral and auditory phenomenon *first*: 'this voice out of the unseen – was a poor fellow-creature in misery, to be succoured and helped out of his trouble'.<sup>19</sup> It is the praxis of *listening* empirically and of trusting the auditory sense that leads the father to a realisation akin to Horatio's in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603): there are more things in heaven and earth, this story suggests, than are accounted for in Enlightenment philosophies. Luke Thurston describes the spectre's speech as a 'threshold voice' emanating from the ruined home, one that calls to a narrator who himself is located on an 'ideological threshold' that presents an opportunity to be transformed by alterity.<sup>20</sup>

As Scott Brewster observes, 'Oliphant's ghost stories suggest that intimacy is found through estrangement, and opening up to the Other need not involve fear'.<sup>21</sup> To be intimate with the ghost is a decisively ethical and transformative act that is auditory in nature. In surveying nineteenth-century Scottish Gothic, Brewster reads the spectral encounter of 'The Open Door' alongside the writings of James Hogg and Robert Louis Stevenson to examine the Scottish ghost story's mirroring of what Jacques Lacan terms 'extimacy' – that is, an intimate yet unnerving and *external* experience with the other that, given its association with Gothic doubling, elides any notion that the self can be clearly delineated from what it professes not to be.<sup>22</sup> It is only through *work* that one can truly learn from the spectral other. That work may mean conversing with and attending to an other who, when first encountered, terrifies or horrifies us. By the end of the tale, any scepticism towards the existence of the ghost is painted as narrow-minded, and itself delusory. The belief that this

<sup>18</sup> Luke Thurston, 'Stories Not Like Any Others: Ghosts and the Ethics of Literature', in Scott Brewster and Luke Thurston (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 467–75 (pp. 471–2).

<sup>19</sup> Margaret Oliphant, *The Open Door and Other Stories of the Seen and Unseen*, ed. Mike Ashley (London: The British Library, 2021), p. 119.

<sup>20</sup> Thurston, 'Stories Not Like Any Others', p. 473.

<sup>21</sup> Scott Brewster, 'Extimacies: Strange Attachments in James Hogg, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Margaret Oliphant', *Gothic Studies* 24:1 (2022): 57–69 (p. 64).

<sup>22</sup> Brewster, 'Extimacies', p. 58.



haunting could be theatrical artifice, even the act of a ventriloquist, is judged negatively by the narrator when he observes it in Roland's doctor, Simson: 'The miserable voice, the spirit in pain, [Simson] could think of as the result of ventriloquism, or reverberation, or – anything you please: an elaborate prolonged hoax, executed somehow by the tramp that had found a lodging in the old tower.'<sup>23</sup> Oliphant's tale takes us to the very threshold of reasoned and reasonable listening in order to transgress these limits, offering up a more radical ontology – one that is close to what Jacques Derrida has referred to as a *hauntology* – that pays heed to what is absent, present and in-between in the physical and the spectral world. Such attentive listening out for and to the spectral voice is itself an ethical act.

In adopting a methodology of 'listening' to Gothic literature throughout this Element, I draw from certain understandings of listening as praxis, which have been articulated in the field of sound studies. In *The Audible Past* (2003), his history of sound recording and reproduction, Jonathan Sterne argues for a recalibration of the models of cause and effect that have traditionally shaped studies that explore the influence of sonic technologies upon culture. Importantly, Sterne does not privilege technology as the source from which may spring fresh understandings of sound and listening. Instead, he argues that 'new sound technologies had an impact on the nature of sound or hearing, but they were part of social and cultural currents'.<sup>24</sup> While Sterne's ideas may liberate us from privileging technological developments over broader cultural production, his overarching definition of sound reminds us of a limit to the compatibility of his field of study with literary acoustics: for Sterne, 'sound is a class of vibration that might be heard'.<sup>25</sup>

The phenomenological problem that lies at the heart of the application of sound studies to literary acoustics is that the former field's functional understanding of sound seems incompatible with the latter's status as representation. Yet, in a move that is useful for literary analysis, Sterne understands 'audible' to mean 'a person in whom "auditory images" are predominant over tactile and visual stimuli' and transposes this definition into a scholarly category that denotes 'hearing and listening as developed and specialised practices, rather than inherent capacities'.<sup>26</sup> The close linguistic association between Sterne's interest in 'auditory images' and Ferdinand de Saussure's influential account of the signifier as a sound image in his *Lectures on General Linguistics* (1916) is obvious. Perhaps more importantly, Sterne furnishes the critical practice of 'listening' with a series of connotations that may be read as epistemological starting points for scholarly engagement with literary soundscapes. Underpinning the practice of sound studies, 'listening' becomes 'a directed, learned activity: it is a definite cultural

<sup>23</sup> Oliphant, *The Open Door and Other Stories*, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p. 11. <sup>26</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p. 96.

practice. Listening requires hearing but is not simply reducible to hearing'.<sup>27</sup> The diachronic and intertextual nature of the Gothic's reiteration of a series of its signature soundscapes means that these soundworlds often resist being read via a cause-and-effect historical analysis. As such, representations of troubling voices in the Gothic are transhistorical in the sense that they recur across a series of intertextual relations that often defy periodicity and historical boundaries.

Patently, any act of reading creates an interpretative relationship between the mind and the signifier, between the mind's ear, as it were, and what the eye sees on the page. Studies of the acoustics of the literary text understandably approach the question of just how text produces sound heard by the mind's ear tentatively and with care. One such example is Angela Leighton's *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (2018), which focuses on the peculiarly sonic nature of poetry. As Leighton puts it, in an act of reading, 'the ear hovers somewhere between a literal and a metaphorical faculty in the work of reading, between a sense perception, alert to real noises, and a figure for hearing which might pay attention to sounds on the page that are self-evidently inaudible'.<sup>28</sup> Reading sharpens our perception, creating an alertness to representations of sound and to the acoustic aura produced by text. Gothic texts revel in heightening the senses and elicit in their readerships a desire to *know*; they promise reward, revelation and even horror. And the revelations we crave might be uttered – be that in a whisper, a confession or a pleading scream.

In her introduction to *Hearing Things*, Angela Leighton draws together work on the acoustics of poetry to emphasise that attentive listening takes us towards the very limits of the audible. As in Oliphant's 'The Open Door', such limits can be porous, inviting transgression and going beyond them can open new vistas of experience. Recalling, then, the heightening of senses experienced during moments of terror and suspense in the Gothic, for instance in a heroine's tentative approach to a secret or occluded chamber, attentive listening is a straining of the senses or analytical faculties that compels us to confront the limits of what can and cannot be heard. As Leighton puts it:

Beyond what is technically called "the threshold of audibility" lies the huge, unheard "sound shadow" of noises outside our range: those too high or too low for human detection, or just too far away. Thresholds are a limit as well as an opening. When thinking about the complexities of listening to and in literature, the notion of thresholds as places of passage and blockage, corridors and doors, might become a suggestive working metaphor for the kinds of attention demanded by the literary text.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Sterne, *The Audible Past*, p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> Leighton, *Hearing Things*, p. 22.