

The Victorian Aura of the Recorded Voice*

John M. Picker

AFTER “FILLING FOUR DOZEN CYLINDERS,” Mark Twain confessed to William Dean Howells in April 1891 that he had given up trying to dictate his latest novel *The American Claimant* into a phonograph that Howells had rented for him.¹ As a result of his experience, Twain, unlike those astounded early listeners who found the Victorian phonograph a “recording angel,” concluded it was a corrupting demon. “You can’t write literature with it,” he wrote to Howells, “because it hasn’t any ideas & it hasn’t any gift for elaboration, or smartness of talk, or vigor of action, or felicity of expression, but is just matter-of-fact, compressive, unornamental, & as grave & unsmiling as the devil” (641). Within the novel itself, Twain blasted the supposed utility of the new invention when his hero Colonel Sellers proposes a “grand adaptation of the phonograph to marine service”: “You store up profanity in it for use at sea . . . a ship can’t afford a hundred mates; but she can afford a hundred Cursing Phonographs. . . . Imagine a big storm, and a hundred of my machines all cursing away at once—splendid spectacle, splendid!—you couldn’t hear yourself think. Ship goes through that storm perfectly serene—she’s just as safe as if she’d been on shore.”²

With his fruitless experiment in dictation, Twain joined an increasing number of writers who recognized that while the phonograph, which had been invented by Thomas Edison in 1878 and “perfected” by him ten years later, might delight and affirm those recording their voices, it could also mock and betray them. Endless repetition of a disembodied voice had the potential to distort even the most benign speech into a monotonous rant that sounded diabolical, perhaps even terrifying. As an audience member at one of the early demonstrations of the machine famously put it, “It sounds more like the devil every time.”³ Although the art of ventriloquy historically had fostered the notion of a gap between speaker and voice, the phonograph mechanized this theatrical act, displacing it with a simple scientific process that had similar results. Quite suddenly in the late 1880s, throwing voices became easy, but lost was the control that the ventriloquist had always had over placement and timing. With such fiendish possibilities, the operation of the phonograph

* This essay is adapted from a chapter that will appear in *Hearing Things* by John M. Picker, copyright by Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc.

carried inherent risk, for the playback process was open to manipulation by anyone with access to the controls. Having made a record, how would it be used, and when, where, and for whom would it be played? Those questions occupied fin-de-siècle authors as they explored the impact of the phonograph on the relations between voice and identity, and the dynamics between mastery and degeneration.

While moderns like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot used the gramophone, the rival and ultimate successor to the phonograph, to depict their concerns over the disintegration of artistic “aura” in an age of mechanical reproduction (to echo the title of Walter Benjamin’s formative essay on the work of art in the modern era), Victorians utilized the phonograph in ways that spoke to their own concerns over issues ranging from the domestic to the imperial. Criticism has begun to identify a “phonographic logic” operating in Joseph Conrad’s turn-of-the-century writing, and to claim, rightly, I think, that Conrad sees the “phonographic” process of disembodied voice into contextless synecdoche as ultimately destructive and inadequate, in ways that are distinct from later modernist attitudes. The value of such criticism lies in its focused illumination of the way technology can influence technique in the work of a pivotal literary figure.⁴ My work, on the other hand, takes a broader approach to the varied, often contradictory late-Victorian manifestations of the phonograph, in which the machine, in its power to record and replay, promised a special kind of communal integrity even as it extended a troubling sense of fragmentation. What made the phonograph uniquely both thrilling and terrifying was that it offered a salvation not apart from the morbidity of the fin de siècle, but from within and dependent upon it. Seemingly able to flout death itself, the phonograph presented an alternative to Victorian ideologies of domination. Through its mechanical reproduction of voice, it offered forms of control and interaction that late Victorians 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.

In January 1891, just four months before Twain passed damning judgment on the new recording technology, the young doctor Arthur Conan Doyle, on the verge of his historic breakthrough, had his literary agent send out his first submission to the new *Strand Magazine*. The story, which was printed unsigned due to an editorial oversight, was entitled “The Voice of Science,” and it appeared in the March issue, shortly before “A Scandal in Bohemia” ushered in the remarkable run of his Sherlock Holmes stories in the same pages.⁵ “The Voice of Science” not only introduced Conan Doyle to readers of the *Strand*, it also introduced the trope of the “phonograph trick” that he would recycle in two of his

later stories. In "The Voice of Science," the prospect of a bad marriage is foiled when a secretly-made phonograph record publicly exposes the suitor's shadowy past. The central figure in "The Voice of Science" is one of Conan Doyle's typically up-to-date, independent-minded women, the single mother Mrs. Esdaile, "honorary secretary of the ladies' branch of the local Eclectic society" in Birchespool: "she supported Darwin, laughed at Mivart, doubted Haeckel, and shook her head at Weissman, with a familiarity which made her the admiration of University professors and the terror of the few students who ventured to cross her learned but hospitable threshold."⁶ With her daughter Rose, "who was looked on as one of the beauties of Birchespool," she plans a "scientific conversazione" at her house, so cluttered with the latest inventions and experiments that it "had become a museum" (312). "In the post of honour on the central table" among these displays is a tinfoil phonograph, which Esdaile "hope[s] . . . will work without a hitch"; at the gathering she wants to play back a record she had made at a British Association meeting of a professor's remarks "on the life history of the Medusiform Gonophore" (313). Meanwhile, the pressure is on Rose, who has until the end of the evening to reply to a marriage proposal made by Captain Charles Beesly, who will be attending the gathering, and who is rumored to have moved in high circles back in India. Mrs. Esdaile, however, has not endorsed the match: "Well, dear . . .," she tells Rose, "you are old enough to know your own mind. I shall not dictate to you. . . . I own that my own hopes were set upon Professor Stares . . . think of his reputation, dear. Little more than thirty, and a member of the Royal Society'" (313). Also opposing the marriage is Rose's brother Rupert, who tries to disclose some of the rumors he has heard about the Captain from one who knew him in India, but Rose refuses to listen. When alone with the phonograph, Rupert takes matters—rather, the tinfoil records—into his own hands: "Very carefully he drew forth the slips of metal which recorded the learned Professor's remarks, and laid them aside for future use. Into the slots he thrust virgin plates, all ready to receive an impression, and then, bearing the phonograph under his arm, he vanished into his own sanctum" (315). When the guests arrive, the machine is back in place, and Captain Beesly engages in small talk with Rose: "don't call me Captain Beesly; call me Charles. Do, now!' 'Well, then, Charles.' 'How prettily it sounds from your lips!'" (315). The phonograph is finally called into service, and it speaks: "How about Lucy Araminta Pennyfeather?' cried a squeaky little voice. . . . Rupert glanced across at Captain Beesly. He saw a drooping jaw, two protruding eyes, and a face the colour of cheese" (316). It continues—"How about little Martha Hovedeen of the Kensal Choir

Union? . . . Who was it who hid the ace in the artillery card-room at Penshawur? Who was it who was broke in consequence?"—at which point the Captain runs out of the house, never to be seen again. Rose marries Professor Stares, as her mother had urged her to, and lives happily, innocently ever after, even though "there are times when she still gives a thought to the blue-eyed Captain, and marvels at the strange and sudden manner in which he deserted her" (317).

As in many of Conan Doyle's other fin-de-siècle fictions, the lightness of touch in "The Voice of Science" is at odds with the darker insinuations that lurk beneath the surface. The phonograph in "The Voice of Science" is used to protect the purity of the Esdaile home, where, after all, a single mother reigns, from the sexual degeneracy that threatens it in the form of Captain Beesly. Specifically, the phonograph is feminized as a knowing, sinful strumpet, even as Rose, the "beauty of Birchespool," is antiseptically transformed into a docile accessory of science, the young bride who should be seen first—"looked on" by her husband, aptly named Professor *Stares*—and heard second. In language bristling with innuendo, the machine becomes both the passive participant in and speaker of illicit sexuality: Rupert, when "all ready to make an impression," secretly "thrust[s]" his "virgin plates" into the "slots" of the phonograph, carries it off to his "sanctum," and returns it only once it is ready to talk dirty like a kept woman—to broadcast in public the sexual escapades of the Captain. Meanwhile, Rose mechanically utters in a "little tinkling voice" what the Captain tells her to; like the early business phonograph Edison was beginning to market, she takes dictation, in the form of the marital command her mother disingenuously gives her: "I will not attempt to dictate to you, but . . ." In her ultimate obedience to her mother's wishes for a rational marriage to the professor, "one of the most rising scientists in the provinces," Rose preserves the family's propriety, avoiding direct understanding of or contact with the insatiable sexuality of the Captain. The phonograph must metaphorically become a devilish bawd to manipulate the young Rose into angelic and, so to speak, scientific conformity, and to keep the gears of social machinery running smoothly. The fallen machine ends up just repeating gossip about sex and gambling, but the *real* "Voice of Science" in the story, finally, is the reasonable mother's, the practical view Rose defers to, the quiet, repressive drone of the mechanism of social convention.

For Conan Doyle, as this story suggests, and for other writers of the period, the phonograph seemed not only possessed, but more specifically charged with a dangerous sort of sexualized femininity.⁷ The association of phonographs with women was reinforced over the 1890s by the use of the first popular commercial phonographs in the workplace, as office dictation machines, from which female amanuenses transcribed busi-

ness correspondence. With its vibrating diaphragm of an ear and its horned mouth, the phonograph indeed seemed, as Charles Grivel writes, “a machine with a body,” yet this typically was also a *feminine* body, as presented in some of the earliest fictional treatments of the device, French writings from the late 1880s and early 1890s. These included Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s symbolist/sci-fi novel *L’Eve future* (1886), in which a brooding Thomas Edison creates the “Eve of the future,” an android with two golden phonographs for lungs.⁸ An English version of *L’Eve future* did not appear, however, for nearly a century. A more influential text was Jules Verne’s novel *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892; English translation, 1893), a gothic parody set mostly in a Transylvanian castle owned by the evil Baron de Gortz. To the terror of the townspeople and the young Romanian count/hero Franz de Telek, the castle appears haunted by the ghost of a dead opera star (named “La Stilla”—“the silent one”) who had been engaged to Franz and whose final aria, cut short by her death from fright at seeing the Baron in her audience, still can be heard every night echoing from the ramparts. In the end, all is exposed when Franz besieges the castle in mad pursuit of La Stilla’s ghost, only to “[stumble] into the Baron’s private operatic fetish theater,” where an illuminated glass sculpture of the diva stands on a stage and the Baron sits listening to a jewel-encrusted box containing a cylinder of her last performance.⁹ A stray bullet pierces the box as the Baron holds it in his arms to flee: “Her voice—her voice!” he cries, “They have destroyed her voice!” Before the Baron can escape and trap Franz in the dynamited room according to his plan, a prearranged electric charge detonates the dynamite that in turn demolishes the castle. Franz somehow survives the blast, only to discover that the Baron, crushed under the rubble, had secretly made the recording at the final concert and had been listening to it each night ever since while staring at La Stilla’s statue. The villain of *Le Château des Carpathes* thus literally transforms the woman singer into a machine, her voice a mechanical ruse that ensnares men, and the phonograph becomes implicated in an uncanny, ultimately manipulative sensual fantasy.

While the Verne novel offers—to say the least—a tale of odd Freudian entanglements with communications technology, the use it makes of the phonograph suggests it had a profound impact both on Conan Doyle, who reworked it in one of his own stories several years later, and also, one suspects, on Bram Stoker, whose *Dracula* (1897) echoes and inverts it in curious ways. Conan Doyle’s “The Story of the Japanned Box,” published in the *Strand* in 1899, derives its major elements from the Verne novel but implies that the manipulative power of the phonograph also can be used beneficially as a form of self-restraint. “The Japanned Box” is, like Verne’s work, a gothic send-up, but takes place in a

dilapidated English, not Transylvanian, castle; the threat has moved (back) closer to home. "It sent a chill to my heart when first I came there," the narrator, a private tutor named Colmore, recounts, "those enormously thick grey walls, the rude crumbling stones, the smell as from a sick animal which exhaled from the rotting plaster of the aged building."¹⁰ The theme of decay dominates this tale: the rotting castle reflects the moral and emotional state of its owner, the widower John Bollamore, an aristocrat with an air of evil about him, from his "brindled hair, shaggy eyebrows, . . . small, pointed Mephistophelian beard, and lines upon his brow and round his eyes as deep as if they had been carved with a pen-knife" to his "weary, hopeless looking eyes" (3–4). Bollamore, like Verne's Baron de Gortz, is an older, enigmatic recluse "with the snarl of a furious wild beast," spending all his time in his tower study with a photo of his dead wife and the mysterious black box of the story's title (8). Soon Colmore hears "tales of mysterious visitors there, and of voices overheard by the servants," and discovers from a steward that Bollamore hides a secret past: decades ago he had been known as "‘Devil’ Bollamore . . . the leader of the fastest set, bruiser, driver, gambler, drunkard. . . . The greatest rip and debauchee in England!" (5). One night, walking beneath the study, Colmore hears a sound from its window: "It was a voice—the voice undoubtedly of a woman. It was low—so low that it was only in that still night air that we could hear it, but, hushed as it was, there was no mistaking its feminine timbre. It spoke hurriedly, gaspingly for a few sentences, and then was silent—a piteous, breathless, imploring sort of voice" (6). Open to gothic suggestion, Colmore concludes the worst, that Bollamore must be leading "a double and dubious life" by keeping a woman prisoner in "some medieval passage" in the castle: "I conceived a horror of the man," Colmore remarks (7).

As in Verne's novel, such gothic fears are revealed to derive from perfectly "scientific" grounds, and nearly identical ones at that. Colmore, under the effects of chlorodyne for neuralgia, falls into a "semi-conscious state" on a secluded settee in the library and overhears Bollamore enter and take something—readers familiar with Verne's novel already know this will be a phonograph—out of the japanned box he carries: "I heard a strange, crisp metallic clicking, and then the voice. . . . Yes, it was a woman's voice" (10). Like the cylinder record of La Stilla's final aria, "every word was clear, though faint—very faint, for they were the last words of a dying woman" (10). Indeed, that voice is a far cry from the gossipy chatter of the phonograph in "The Voice of Science": "‘I am not really gone, John,’ said the thin, gasping voice. ‘I am here at your very elbow, and shall be until we meet once more. I die happy to think that morning and night you will hear my voice. Oh, John, be

strong, be strong, until we meet again” (10). Bollamore’s dead wife, it turns out, had “brought him back to manhood and decency” from his alcoholism, and she had procured a phonograph once she knew she was dying in order to record a final message urging his self-restraint (6). Bollamore in turn vowed to listen to it twice a day to resist the temptation to revert to his former degenerate state. As in Verne’s tale and “The Voice of Science,” the phonograph in this story occupies a feminine space, but in an ironic twist, Conan Doyle has that site at first *appear* sinful—as seemingly the space, once again, of the kept woman—only to have it ultimately revealed as the last bastion of propriety for a guilty man. And in an autobiographical vein, Conan Doyle incorporates his own disturbing memories of an alcoholic and abusive father in the portrayal of the man tempered by the ailing wife-turned-machine. What is reinforced in this tale is not only the classic Victorian conception of the woman/wife as the voice of domestic discipline capable of containing unchecked male sloth, but more tellingly, the sense that in the dying light of the nineteenth century, such a voice of self-control had become mechanical, a vanishing remnant of the past, and also was dying or perhaps already was dead. At the end of the tale, upon learning that Bollamore had been recently killed in a carriage accident, Colmore soberly adds, “I do not fancy it was a very unwelcome event to him” (10). The technology that at first had suggested to the narrator a secret life of vice instead ends up facilitating a monotonous pattern of solitary sobriety. In an increasingly isolated, libertine, and faithless age, Conan Doyle shows how the phonograph could manufacture an artificial communion with the past, out of which nevertheless might come self-mastery, even a bleak salvation.

Edison’s own interaction with his invention, however, was more earthy and visceral. A story from an 1879 account of the origin of the phonograph described one way Edison discovered the principle behind the machine: “In the course of some experiments Mr. Edison was making with the telephone, a stylus attached to the diaphragm pierced his finger at the moment when the diaphragm began to vibrate under the influence of the voice, and the prick was enough to draw blood. It then occurred to him that if the vibrations of the diaphragm enabled the stylus to pierce the skin, they might produce on a flexible surface such distinct outlines as to represent all the undulations produced by the voice.”¹¹ More painful still is part of the phonograph story concerning its inventor’s deafness: “Edison’s hearing deficit forced him when testing different materials’ acoustic properties to follow the same bizarre technique he would use decades later when auditioning pianists for his phonograph records: clenching his teeth around a metal plate attached to the sounding apparatus, so that vibrations were conveyed through his

resonating jawbone—meaning, in effect, that *he virtually heard through his teeth*.”¹² Edison’s daughter Madeleine recalled a related experience from her childhood:

During the winter of 1912, what seemed to Madeleine like every night, a pianist would “pound out” waltzes in the downstairs den. Sometimes her papa would put his teeth on the piano—literally bite it—so that the vibrations resonated through his skull bones. . . . One evening, Madame Montessori [the educator] was a dinner guest at Glenmont while the waltzes were being auditioned, and the great lady huddled in the corner of the den weeping because Edison could not hear, and was putting his teeth in the side of the grand piano. . . . Edison’s personal Disc Phonograph, preserved at the Laboratory, also shows teeth marks on its soft wood framework. (321)

It is one of the famous ironies of invention that the man behind the phonograph suffered from severe deafness. Less known, perhaps with good reason, is Edison’s manner of close listening, with all its animalistic suggestiveness. Edison gnawed the grooves of his own incisors into the wood of the groove-machine. From pricking to biting, from blood to bone, there is something primal, piercing, about the phonograph, its needle, and its inventor, something, one might even say . . . vampiric.

So it should come as no surprise that along with such technological innovations as typewriters and Kodak cameras, diary-keeping phonographs play an important part in the action of the classic vampire novel that is, in the words of one of its characters, “nineteenth century up-to-date with a vengeance.”¹³ With a narrative that is at once *about* and (supposedly) communicated *through* such gadgetry, *Dracula* may appear to be, as Jennifer Wicke has put it, a consumptive tale that is the “first great *modern* novel in British literature.”¹⁴ Yet at the heart of Stoker’s text lurks a distinctly late-Victorian fascination with the primacy of the voices that pulse through it. For *Dracula* explores the occult dimension of what Rilke called “Primal Sound,” the sublime tones that he imagined might be revealed if one were to play back with a phonograph needle the groove of the coronal suture of the skull.¹⁵ In *Dracula* Stoker, as had Edison and Rilke, closely associates blood and bones with tones. Not only the ancient powers of the Count, but also the distinctly modern ones of the phonograph, ensure that speaking and hearing in the fin-de-siècle world of *Dracula* are draining and confusing. Yet it is the phonograph and other tools of modernity featured in the novel that allow the band of heroes to harness sound collectively and defeat the vampire with scientific and professional mastery.

Phonographic representations in *Dracula* go beyond merely the literal. The text of *Dracula* itself emerges from sound, or rather sound-writing. The first lines of the novel proper—“Jonathan Harker’s Jour-

nal / (*kept in shorthand*)”—indicate the importance of sound-capture for this famous opening section of gothic imprisonment and for the chain of events it triggers. Jonathan may be a naive solicitor, but he is also revealed to be, as his surname suggests, an experienced listener, a “harker” who first hears and reports sounds of ominous foreboding: the incessant howling of Dracula’s wolves and the “harsh, metallic whisper” of his hypnotic, otherworldly voice (*D* 64). Harker’s method of recording these experiences, moreover, is phonography, the phonetic shorthand system devised by Isaac Pitman in 1837 and so coined by him in 1840 with the publication of his best-selling *Phonography, or Writing by Sound*, which became the standard Victorian shorthand manual, reaching twelve editions through 1897, the year *Dracula* was published (and the year Pitman died). Harker, then, acts as a kind of human phonograph, as a sound-recorder whose modern hieroglyphs keep his journal safe from the Count’s prying eyes. But Harker, trapped literally in the castle, is also *used* by Dracula as a language machine, much as Edison had envisioned phonographs would be used for language tutorials: “as yet I only know your tongue through books,” the Count tells him, “To you, my friend, I look that I know it to speak . . . by our talking I may learn the English intonation” (*D* 31–32). The distinctly alien sound of Dracula’s arrival on English soil, however, betrays his outsider status: “A little after midnight came a strange sound from over the sea, and high overhead the air began to carry a strange, faint, hollow booming” (*D* 103). The Count himself, however, ultimately acquires a kind of phonographic presence in the disembodied voice that Mina Harker, once bitten and nursed by him, hears and must obey: “When my brain says ‘Come!’ to you, you shall cross land or sea to do my bidding” (*D* 371).¹⁶

The emphasis on sound and voice in the novel is encapsulated in the phonograph that Stoker indicates records Dr. Seward’s medical and personal diary. Used as a medical tool within the text, then, the phonograph literally records “The Voice of Science.” But in ways more provocative than Conan Doyle’s phonograph stories, the machine in *Dracula* acts as a locus of sexual anxiety and symbolism among Seward, Lucy Westenra, and Mina. As he goes to become, as Van Helsing puts it, a “bigamist,” to give blood to the drained and nearly-vampiric Lucy whom he loves, Seward makes a point of noting that he “take[s his] cylinder with [him]” so as to “complete [his] entry on Lucy’s phonograph” (*D* 227, 184–85). Following Lucy’s graphic death scene in the graveyard, Mina desires access to the secrets of Seward’s machine: “I had never seen one, and was much interested” (*D* 283). Listening to the “hollow cylinders of metal covered with dark wax” on which Seward confesses his unrequited love for Lucy, Mina senses and covets a new intimacy between the doctor and herself: as Mina says to him, “That is

a wonderful machine, but it is cruelly true. It told me, in its very tones, the anguish of your heart. It was like a soul crying out to almighty God. No one must hear them ever again! . . . none other need now hear your heart beat, as I did” (*D* 285–86). Once Mina begins to transcribe Seward’s cylinders, this new intimacy lends to their restrained professional interactions a sensual charge:

After dinner I came with Dr. Seward to his study. He brought back the phonograph from my room, and I took my typewriter. He placed me in a comfortable chair, and arranged the phonograph so I could touch it without getting up, and showed me how to stop it in case I should want to pause. Then he very thoughtfully took a chair with his back to me, so that I might be as free as possible, and began to read. I put the forked metal to my ears and listened.

When . . . done, I lay back in my chair powerless. (*D* 287)

In a work with so many scenes of sublimated sexuality, it is perhaps tempting to read into this act of listening, with its private undertones, a moment of autoerotic implications for the character who satisfies standard Victorian masculine *and* feminine gender expectations—as bold, resourceful, New-Woman vampire-hunter as well as dutiful secretary, wife, and mother to Jonathan and his band of ineffective men. But the scene more directly suggests the power of hearing and sound in this novel both to consummate and consume. So Mina can claim writing in her journal to be “like whispering to one’s self and listening at the same time” (*D* 96–97). At the end of the novel, when Van Helsing hypnotizes the bitten and suckled Mina to, in his words, “tell what the Count see and hear” in order to lead the men to Dracula’s hiding place, she repeats the same sounds with “unvaried” words, over and over, like a broken record: “lapping waves, rushing water, and creaking masts” (*D* 415, 430). It is entirely in keeping with her established intimate connection with sound-writing and sound-writers (both human and mechanical) that Mina Harker is herself an expert recorder, transmitter, and replayer.¹⁷

Stoker may indeed have been influenced by Verne’s *Le Château des Carpathes* to bring a phonograph into *Dracula*, but the workings of the machine take on their own symbolic significance within his story. In terms that became the source of years of legal wrangling over patent infringement, Edison’s 1878 phonograph patent stated that the device worked by “indenting” marks on a yielding surface (*FP* 40). *Dracula* is in its way a novel of indentations, most concretely, perhaps, in Stoker’s use of the phonograph, but also in the inescapable bites of vampire teeth and the impress of typewriter hammers by which Mina has “made manifest” the entire manuscript (*D* 6). It is of course this indentation,

this typing and hiding of manifest copies, that Stoker would have us believe allows the “evidence” to survive despite Dracula’s attempt to destroy it by setting fire to the “original” manuscript and cylinders (*D* 367). The ancient Count can only be defeated by the heroes’ altogether more cold-blooded professional labor, in Friedrich Kittler’s words, their “mechanical discourse processing”: “Stoker’s *Dracula* is no vampire novel, but rather the written account of our bureaucratization. Anyone is free to call this a horror novel as well” (DL 71, 74).

Put another way, the means to combat the “reverse colonization” that Stephen Arata has identified underlying Dracula’s mission to England is through a technological imperialism whose mechanisms ultimately consume its warriors.¹⁸ “How many of us begin a new record with each day of our lives?” Seward naively asks into his phonograph, unaware that his daily ritual of recording enacts precisely this (*D* 96). Harker the phonographer longs to escape from “the groove of [his] life” on the careerist track; yet his wife Mina finally must become a phonographic medium to track Dracula down (*D* 243). The vampire whom Renfield calls “Master” and who longs endlessly to reproduce his race burns the master cylinders of Seward and the others; yet the original recordings have already been transcribed, and by the end of the novel both Seward and Harker ironically have become masters themselves in hierarchies of professional reproduction: “You were only student then; now you are master,” Van Helsing tells Seward, while upon the death of his overseer, Harker rises “from clerk to master” (*D* 157, 205). The novel that alleges to be a copy of a copy has many masters, but no master take. Instead, in their phonographic resourcefulness, the Western victors oddly seem to echo the toothy Transylvanian.¹⁹ A lethal stake strikes the vampire heart, while a stylus on a cylinder summons the human past; for each, the path to the grave is through the groove. But whose mouth is it anyway, that constructs this imperial archive of “metallic whispers”? The Count’s, with his piercing canines, or the Doctor’s, with his resonant needles? Dracula cries: “This man belongs to me!” (*D* 55). Seward sighs: “How I miss my phonograph!” (*D* 431). And Stoker, through all their rush to bite and engrave, keeps tight-lipped.

If *Dracula* only nibbles at the possibilities for serious problems with the notion of a phonographic voice, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, first serialized in *Blackwood’s* two years later, feasts on them. “Voice,” that foundational yet slippery term of textual criticism—“that shibboleth of the humanist literary tradition,” in Garrett Stewart’s words—is on trial in Conrad’s novella.²⁰ Through an exploration of the relations between sound and speech, *Heart of Darkness* conveys the inherent insufficiency of making a record of the voice. Addressing the question of what it “would mean to write a work of literature . . . within this new paradigm of sound

and inscription,” Conrad uses what has been called “phonographic logic” to show that in the wake of the phonograph, the concept of “voice” has become “a part-object standing for nothing beyond itself” (VB 227, 229). Edward Said has claimed that with Conrad “we are in a world being made and unmade more or less all the time,” yet it might be more helpful to consider the world of *Heart of Darkness* as one perpetually sounded and resounded.²¹ For this is not only an “Edison-haunted, electrical text” (VB 233), but also one deeply invested in attempting to record an aural landscape of fierce mutterings and menacing silences. References to the phonograph in Conrad’s letters from this period have shown that the author was familiar with the machine. Indeed, the phonograph is everywhere and nowhere in *Heart of Darkness*, literally absent though always present in metaphorical associations and residual effects.

In January 1885, the *New York Times* published “The Phonograph in Africa,” a remarkable op-ed piece that shed light on the mingled dynamics of technology and imperialism Conrad later examined in his novella. The author of the column contended that “two travelers who are about to try to cross the African continent” planned to put the phonograph to its first practical use to “obtain specimens of Central African languages” and bring these back West for further study.²² But the author went on to raise suspicions of these seemingly innocuous motives:

It is possible that the two travelers are wicked and ambitious men, who . . . have conceived the idea of introducing a new religion into Central Africa and of ruling the entire country in the character of high priests. Nothing could be easier than to carry such a scheme into effect. The travelers could describe the phonograph as a new and improved portable god, and call upon the native Kings to obey it. A god capable of speaking, and even of carrying on a conversation, in the presence of swarms of hearers would be something entirely new in Central Africa, where the local gods are constructed out of solid billets of wood, and are hopelessly dumb. There is not a Central African living who would dare to refuse to obey the phonograph god, and the two travelers, as its only authorized priests, could bring the greater part of the continent into subjection for as long a time as they could keep their portable god in good repair and working order.

In this disturbing “techno-colonial dream,” the travelers use the peculiar linguistic features of the new technology to conquer central Africa effortlessly. The phonograph becomes all-powerful not so much in physical presence but because it captures “the social power of the ruler’s voice” (269–70). In other words, it is the machine’s command of speech, rather than its appearance, that compels African subjugation. It is

unclear from the historical record whether these explorers ever set out, or for that matter even existed, for phonographs had their first official use in ethnographic fieldwork five years later, when the anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes recorded Passamaquoddy and Zuni Pueblo in the Americas.²³ But it is striking that even as early as 1885, the notion of a particularly “wicked and ambitious” ideology of recorded language was imagined as lurking in the mechanisms of one of the marvels of the age.

In *Le Château des Carpathes* Verne had begun to suggest how the phonograph might invite such devious manipulations of speech, but it was for Conrad to confront the ways in which “phonographic logic” could corrupt the integrity of the individual voice within the context of diabolical imperialist practices.²⁴ As described by Marlow, Kurtz is indeed a kind of phonographic god, one ultimately revealed to be nothing more nor less than a “wicked and ambitious” voice of manipulation and conquest. “I had never imagined him as doing, you know, but as discoursing,” Marlow says, “The man presented himself as a voice.”²⁵ The devoted Russian states the case simply: “You don’t talk with that man—you listen to him” (*HD* 88). Kurtz’s voice mesmerizes natives and colonists alike. When the armed tribesmen approach his hut, it is only his voice that pacifies them (*HD* 97). Kurtz’s “weirdly voracious” mouth, open wide “as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him,” echoes both Dracula’s all-consuming mouth and the gaping horned mouth of the fin-de-siècle phonograph (*HD* 97). Hearing Kurtz utter “I am glad,” Marlow rhapsodizes about the disjunction between Kurtz’s wasted body and majestic voice: “The volume of tone he emitted without effort, almost without the effort of moving his lips, amazed me. A voice! A voice! It was grave, profound, vibrating, while the man did not seem capable of a whisper” (*HD* 98). “A voice! A voice!” Marlow later repeats over Kurtz’s deathbed, “It rang deep to the very last. It survived his strength to hide in the magnificent folds of eloquence the barren darkness of his heart. . . . The shade of the original Kurtz frequented the bedside of the hollow sham, whose fate it was to be buried presently in the mould of primeval earth” (*HD* 110). Kurtz’s greed for ivory has reduced him to a speaking shell of the “original,” a corrupted copy degenerated into darkness, a kind of hard-to-find bootlegged imperialist. Only that remnant of identity, his voice, remains, a hollow replica on an ivory-shaded cylinder of totemic power.

Marlow is on the one hand Kurtz’s auditor, his phonographer, the only one who can play him back, so to speak, to the Intended and the unnamed narrator. But more generally, Marlow is Conrad’s Harker, actively listening to his surroundings, struggling to make sense of the “violent babble of uncouth sounds” of natives, the “tremor of far-off drums . . . weird, appealing, suggestive, and wild,” and the “high

stillness” and impenetrable hush of the thick growth of forest around him as he journeys to Kurtz (*HD* 38, 39, 58). The colonial railway-building Marlow encounters is “a rapacious and pitiless folly” marked by “a heavy and dull detonation” of mindless blasting, set off against the ominous noise of violated nature: “The rapids were near, and an uninterrupted, uniform, head-long, rushing noise filled the mournful silence of the grove, where not a breath stirred, not a leaf moved, with a mysterious sound—as though the tearing pace of the launched earth had suddenly become audible” (*HD* 32, 34). On his trek to the Inner Station, Marlow travels like a needle in grooves around the hollow core of an engraved continent, tracing and relaying “paths, paths, everywhere; a stamped-in network of paths spreading over the empty land” (*HD* 39). He sounds the landscape like a stylus, fittingly using a “sounding-pole” to guide his steamer along the narrow groove of the Congo on the “track” of Kurtz (*HD* 74, 105). The uncanny doubling effect that critics have often observed between Marlow and Kurtz unites them too in their appropriated voicings. That their dialogue is wholly subsumed in dual layers of narrative calls into question the reliability and clarity of it: “I found myself lumped along with Kurtz . . .,” Marlow says after an uncomfortable talk with the manager, “I was unsound!” (*HD* 101). Sounding and unsound, voicing and voiced, Marlow becomes at once listener, archive, and nested narrator; or needle, record, and harnessed talking machine.

Heart of Darkness manages to crystallize into moments of remarkable dialogical precision, what in the wake of mass-media journalism we now would call sound bites. Perhaps no shorter work of modern fiction has contributed so many quotable lines to the pop-culture lexicon. People who have not even read the work (and perhaps not even seen *Apocalypse Now*) still are familiar with some of its famous tags: “Exterminate all the brutes!,” “Mistah Kurtz—he dead,” and of course, “The horror! The horror!” (*HD* 84, 112).²⁶ Sound bites are themselves phonographic phenomena—snippets of endlessly recycled recorded speech, catch-phrases standing in for the whole of a particular event or experience. But Kurtz’s final words do more: they point to the risks the phonograph would bring to the world in the century ahead. In its self-contained echo, “The horror! The horror!” is perhaps the greatest needle-skip (or, more precisely, needle-stick) in modern literature, the summative judgment that insists on voicing not a unified, coherent singularity but a divided, paralyzed vision of self that persists throughout modernist writing. The needle-skip (or stick), with its connotations of immobility and hollow repetition, recurs in the work of those who were themselves discomfited by the successor to the cylinder phonograph, the more insidious gramophone: in Eliot’s “Love Song” (1917), with Prufrock’s

faint “Do I dare? Do I dare?”; in Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), with Quentin Compson’s tortured “I dont hate it! I dont hate it!”; and most explicitly in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* (1941), with the chuffing machine’s monotonous “*Dispersed are we. Dispersed are we.*” Kurtz’s last confession lies in a scratched groove on which moderns reinscribed their own voices.

What is more, *Heart of Darkness* explores the untranslatability of sound as it bears on the limits of vision. “Of course, in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know . . .,” Marlow comments midway through his tale (*HD* 50). But the narrator of the novella immediately undermines this assertion: “It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see each other. For a long time already, he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. The others might have been asleep, but I was awake. I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river” (*HD* 50). The blindness of this scene calls to mind lines from Eliot’s “The Hollow Men,” the epigraph of which is lifted from *Heart of Darkness*: “The eyes are not here / There are no eyes here.” Marlow, who “did not see the man in the name [Kurtz] any more than you do,” ironically also cannot be seen, but only heard, like Kurtz, as a disembodied voice (*HD* 50). Through Marlow, Conrad suggests, finally, that the phonographic dynamic of the severed voice—the act of listening to an invisible source, even the act of oral narrative itself—fails to capture the essence of lived experience: “I’ve been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced,—but what’s the good? They were common everyday words, the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares” (*HD* 107). The disembodied voices of Kurtz and Marlow, the acts of retelling and replaying by Marlow and the unnamed narrator, are not enough to clarify or resuscitate the past, the silent, or the dead, but only conjure them in mysterious, incomplete, and distant ways. Marlow recognizes that his replay of Kurtz is itself inadequate even as it emerges from the amorphous, corrupt babble of his narrative: “He was little more than a voice. And I heard him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense. Voices, voices—even the girl herself—now—” (*HD* 80). “His last word—to live with,” the Intended begs Marlow. But in the phonograph-text of *Heart of Darkness*, words, and voices, no longer possess the kind of

authenticity, masterful finality, and authority the grieving woman wants. First-time readers of the tale (and even some experienced ones) fall into the trap Conrad lays when they claim that “it is not Kurtz’s voice but Marlow’s that we hear as readers.”²⁷ Is it? The initial vocal conflation of the text, Marlow as replayer of Kurtz’s oratorical fragments, is amplified by the fact that there is a second level of listening and replaying, the anonymous harker who sits in silence on the Thames, waiting for the word he thinks will resolve Marlow’s “inconclusive experience,” the clue that, when (and if) it arrives, surely opens more doors than it closes. In their earlier fictions Conan Doyle and Stoker had stopped short of deep investigation of the effect of voice recording technology on the craft of fiction-making itself. But Conrad is less cautionary than he is wise to the ambiguous fissures that modern repetition opens up. His *Heart of Darkness* enacts the narrative cost—or is it gain?—of technological progress.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

NOTES

- 1 Mark Twain, *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 641; hereafter cited in text.
- 2 Mark Twain, *The American Claimant* (New York, 1892), pp. 176–77.
- 3 Qtd. in Robert Conot, *A Streak of Luck* (New York, 1979), p. 109.
- 4 Ivan Kreilkamp, “A Voice Without a Body: The Phonographic Logic of *Heart of Darkness*,” *Victorian Studies*, 40 (1997), 237; hereafter cited in text as VB. Kreilkamp’s article appeared as I was writing a considerably longer version of this essay, and it will be evident that I am indebted to it toward the end of this article, though our differences are marked. While Kreilkamp deals nearly exclusively with Conrad’s novella, I attempt to place it in a line of literary, visual, and historical representations of the phonograph that helped shape it. These include not only the works of fiction discussed here, but also the early phonograph recordings made of Robert Browning and Alfred Tennyson (and, in Tennyson’s case, by him as well), Francis Barraud’s painting of “His Master’s Voice,” and the important work of publicity and preservation done by Edison’s London agent George Gouraud.
- 5 John Michael Gibson and Richard Lancelyn Green, “Introduction,” in their edition of *The Unknown Conan Doyle: Uncollected Stories* (London, 1982), p. xviii.
- 6 [Arthur Conan Doyle], “The Voice of Science,” *Strand Magazine*, 1 (1891), 312; hereafter cited in text.
- 7 The association of voice machines with the feminine is explored by Avital Ronnell, who discusses the telephone as a “maternal machine” and the corporate symbol of “Ma Bell” as the remnants of “a woman’s body retransmitted through judicial procedures”; she relates a curious anecdote in which a group of New England Puritans fought to have the telephone forbidden from placement in the bedroom because it was seen as a sexually invasive device (*The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech* [Lincoln, Neb., 1989], pp. 339, 280, 104). Tim Armstrong, on the other hand, considers how

modernism transformed women's bodies into machines, in *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 159–83.

8 Charles Grivel, "The Phonograph's Horned Mouth," in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), p. 33. Villiers's *L'Ève future* has been translated as *Tomorrow's Eve* by Robert Martin Adams (Chicago, 1982). Grivel discusses Villiers's work, as well as the phonograph in shorter fin-de-siècle works by Marcel Schwob and Alfred Jarry.

9 Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, Voice, and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford, 1995), p. 167. Verne's novel has been translated as *The Castle of the Carpathians* (London, 1893), and more recently as *Carpathian Castle*, ed. I. O. Evans (New York, 1963). This was possibly the first literary representation of a phonograph used for musical purposes; it would have been timely, as the first commercial catalog of cylinder recordings was issued by Columbia only the previous year, with over one hundred musical selections, including marches, waltzes, voice and orchestra, instrumental duets, and ever-popular (because easy to record and reproduce) whistling (Roland Gelatt, *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877–1977* [New York, 1977], p. 48; hereafter cited in text as *FP*).

10 A. Conan Doyle, "The Story of the Japanned Box," *Strand Magazine*, 17 (1899), 3; hereafter cited in text. The story was later included in his *Round the Fire Stories* (1908). Conan Doyle's final (and least effective) use of the "phonograph trick" was in "The Mazarin Stone," included in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes* (1927): Holmes uses a gramophone record of his violin-playing as a decoy to outfox the villain. I don't discuss it here because it is beyond the time frame of this essay and also, like a number of the other late Holmes stories, of poor quality and questionable authorship.

11 T. A. L. Du Moncel, *The Telephone, The Microphone, and The Phonograph* (New York, 1879), p. 237.

12 Neil Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century* (New York, 1995), pp. 72–73 (emphasis in original); hereafter cited in text.

13 Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Maurice Hindle (New York, 1993), p. 51; hereafter cited in text as *D*.

14 Jennifer Wicke, "Vampiric Typewriting: *Dracula* and Its Media," *ELH*, 59 (1992), 467 (emphasis in original).

15 Rainer Maria Rilke, "Primal Sound" (1919), in *Where Silence Reigns: Selected Prose*, tr. G. Craig Houston (New York, 1978), pp. 51–56. Friedrich Kittler reprints Rilke's essay and discusses it at length in *Gramophone Film Typewriter*, tr. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, 1999), pp. 38–51.

16 Garrett Stewart writes that Dracula's telepathic powers are "the necromantic counterpart of the new telegraphic and phonographic technologies of electrically displaced origin which labor together to outmode and obliterate him" (*Dear Reader* [Baltimore, 1996], p. 379). I take up this doubling effect below.

17 In a valuable essay that has been largely overlooked in most current criticism on *Dracula*, Kittler interestingly, though with less relevance to the tropes of the novel, claims Mina becomes "merely a sensor or radio transmitter" prefiguring British Naval intelligence ("Dracula's Legacy," in *Essays: Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston [Germ. 1982, Engl. 1989; rpt. Amsterdam, 1997], p. 79; hereafter cited in text as *DL*), while Lisa Gitelman discusses the cultural significance of typewriting with reference to *Dracula*, particularly the peculiar "noiselessness" of the typewriter in conjunction with the eminent visibility of it. According to Gitelman, typewriters, phonographs, and shorthand systems all became "buffers between aural experience and inscribed fact" (*Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* [Stanford, 1999], pp. 215–18).

18 Stephen Arata, "The Occidental Tourist: Stoker and Reverse Colonization," *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 107–32.

- 19 In this I largely concur with Carol Senf, who argues that the novel “revolves, not around the conquest of Evil by Good, but on the similarities between the two” (“*Dracula: The Unseen Face in the Mirror*,” rpt. in *Dracula*, ed. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal [New York, 1997], p. 421).
- 20 Garrett Stewart, “Modernism’s Sonic Waver: Literary Writing and the Filmic Difference,” in *Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies*, ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill, 1997), p. 241.
- 21 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), p. 29.
- 22 “The Phonograph in Africa,” *New York Times*, 34 (19 January 1885), 4. I am indebted to William Pietz’s “The Phonograph in Africa: International Phonocentrism from Stanley to Sarnoff” (in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young [Cambridge, 1987], pp. 263–85; hereafter cited in text) for drawing my attention to this article.
- 23 *The Federal Cylinder Project*, ed. Erika Brady, et al., vol. 1 (Washington, 1984), p. 3.
- 24 The opening installment of *Heart of Darkness* appeared, as it turned out, only one month after Conan Doyle’s rather benign treatment of the machine in “The Japanned Box.”
- 25 Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Robert Hampson (New York, 1995), p. 79; hereafter cited in text as *HD*.
- 26 Kreilkamp calls Kurtz’s last words “autonomous, detachable phonemes” that are inherently “quotable” (“A Voice Without a Body,” 211). The same might be said for any of the sound bites from the novella.
- 27 Clare Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman* (Baltimore, 1995), p. 134.