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THE PULPIT'S AUDIBLE SHADOW: SONIC EXPERIENCE IN DEBORAH KAY DAVIES'S *TIRZAH AND THE PRINCE OF CROWS*

Ed Garland

Abstract

Deborah Kay Davies's 2018 novel *Tirzah and the Prince of Crows* describes the rebellious Tirzah's late teenage years within a small religious community in 1970s Wales. This article explores how Davies attunes the novel's sounds to their social and historical context. To characterise these sounds, I propose the term 'the pulpit's audible shadow', after M. Wynn Thomas's idea of 'the shadow of the pulpit', which refers to the influence of Nonconformism on Welsh writing in English. Thomas attends to sounds heard in chapels, such as 'public prayers ... groans, tears, exclamations'. However, there has been little analysis of how fiction from Wales represents religiously inflected sounds beyond chapel walls. Davies's novel dramatises such sounds by articulating Tirzah's experience of particular sonic effects. Adapting the ideas of Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henry Torgue, I argue that effects emerge in the interrelationship between a sound, a listener and their physical and social environment. Repulsion, an effect 'that produces ... an attitude of rejection and behaviours of flight', emphasises Tirzah's spiritual distance from her chapel community. Filtration, 'a reinforcing or weakening of specific frequencies of a sound', modulates the tensions between Tirzah and her parents within their house. Throughout the novel, Davies's detailed, multi-sensory representations of sonic effects enhance our understanding of how sounds acquire meaning.

Keywords: sound studies, fiction, Nonconformism, sonic experience, aurality, acoustics.

During a village chapel service, ‘Tirzah’s armpits prickle at the way her mother’s voice throbs for Jesus.’¹ The teenage Tirzah is uncomfortable with the sight and sound of her parents, who seem to her ‘by far the most holy’ people in the congregation (p. 2). When she feels the unpleasant sensation in her armpits, Tirzah is ‘immediately’ pulled from a daydream and finds herself ‘back in the circle’ of worship (p. 2). The throb and the prickle are a miniature sonic expression of the novel’s central conflict – Tirzah’s parents consider themselves ‘holy’, but Tirzah wants to live according to her own, very different, ideas of what is sacred. One of the most unusual and valuable features of Deborah Kay Davies’s *Tirzah and The Prince of Crows (TTPC)*, published in 2018, is the way it attends to the sonic dimensions of interpersonal conflicts. Carefully described and sequenced sounds are integral to *TTPC*’s fictional world. Davies’s novel therefore helps us to imagine how historical religious cultures in Wales influenced auditory perceptions.

Existing analyses of Wales’s religious cultures usually attend to sound during moments of dramatic intensity. For example, in M. Wynn Thomas’s *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, which traces the influence of Nonconformism on literature from the nineteenth century to the early 2000s, the auditory dimensions of religious life are confined to those sounds made during services: ‘public prayers, testimonies, confessions, groans, tears, exclamations – these were the electrifying evidence of the presence of the spirit.’² Nonconformist preaching was renowned for its ‘electrifying’ theatrics. Goronwy Rees, who grew up in Aberystwyth as the son of a local minister in the early 1900s, describes the performance of this style, known as the ‘*hwyl*, a special form of impassioned utterance half-way between speech and song, and so rhythmical and emotional that sense gives way entirely to sound.’³ In an exemplary fictional depiction of religious experience in Wales – Emyr Humphreys’s novel *Outside the House of Baal* – the chapel service is explicitly positioned as a sonic experience. During a short dialogue, the minister Mr James advises an aspiring young preacher on how to hold the congregation’s attention: ‘they are there to listen. You aim at their ears.’⁴ But while the chapel service was a form of sonic theatre, the *hwyl* was not the only kind of performance on offer. *TTPC*, for example, describes its minister ‘doggedly coaxing the Holy Spirit as if it were a nervous budgie’ (p. 2). The comically inappropriate tone here implies that not every preacher felt drawn to highly dynamic vocal performances. While *TTPC* offers an alternative to the *hwyl*, it also

expands sonic attention beyond services focused on ministers to include those sounds that a young woman hears inside the chapel, her house and the nearby woods. The sounds Tirzah hears shape her relationships with herself and her peculiarly pious family and community. Because it maintains a religious context for its audible events, *TTPC* explores what I call, adapting the title of Thomas's study, the pulpit's audible shadow.

TTPC is set in the 1970s, when the cultural influence of Nonconformity in Wales was well past its peak. The sect to which Tirzah belongs is enthusiastic but unpopular, perhaps representing what Thomas calls Nonconformity's 'hard' strain, 'with its uncompromising emphasis on original sin,' as opposed to the more prominent liberal strain that 'emphasizes love of the good' (p. 311). The sect in *TTPC* does not explicitly call itself Nonconformist, but it does make use of recognisable Nonconformist features: chapels, groups of elder men, Sunday schools, and so on. Likewise, Davies uses scripture to shape her text: each chapter has a short epigraph drawn from the Bible, to which the events of that chapter more or less explicitly relate. Thus the novel borrows from the form of the sermon, and might confirm Manon Ceridwen James's claim that 'literature is where Welsh women have done their theology.'⁵ While *TTPC*'s scriptural excerpts include well-known adages like 'The Love of Money Is the Root of All Evil,' there are also more unfamiliar citations: 'the Lust of the Flesh, and the Lust of the Eyes,' 'Honey and Milk Are Under Thy Tongue' and 'Praise Him upon the Loud Cymbals' (pp. 108, 19, 64, 92). These excerpts remind us that the Bible is full of the same sensory, sensuous and audible events that Tirzah herself explores with insightful sensitivity under intense social pressure. What she finds during her exploration is a sense of how her personal and social life within her community is, as the philosopher Robin James writes, 'not just a relation among people [but] also a relation among sounds.'⁶

Sonic effects

TTPC explores its 'relation among sounds' through a particular auditory event: the sonic effect. The composers and sociologists Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henry Torgue describe a large number of sonic effects in their book *Sonic Experience*. An effect, they say, is 'a fact

whose appearance [does] not refer directly to a cause.⁷ In other words, we must refer to more than one condition to explain why we hear an effect. Something causes a sound, and something extra happens to that sound as it spreads through its environment. The effect therefore emerges in the *interrelationship* between sound, environment and listener. A simple example is the Doppler effect, in which a sustained sound, such as that made by the engine of a moving vehicle, seems to descend in pitch as it moves away from a stationary listener. In this situation, 'the relation between the observer and the emitting object ... is modified.'⁸ The modification of increasing distance produces the apparent lowering of pitch we call the Doppler effect.⁹ There are many sonic effects, in which various physical and psychological features modify sounds in different ways, but the element common to all effects is that they arise from the interrelationships between the source of the sound and the physical and social environment in which it is heard.

When her armpits 'prickle', Tirzah feels what Augoyard and Torgue call repulsion, 'a psychomotor effect referring to a sound phenomenon that produces ... an attitude of rejection and behaviours of flight, whether mental or real.'¹⁰ The 'sound phenomenon' producing the prickle is the 'throb' in her mother Mair's voice. To Tirzah, the 'throb' makes audible the vast difference in religious feeling between herself and her mother. Moreover, since the throb brings her back from her daydream into physical reality, it also reminds Tirzah of the social limitations she will struggle against as the novel progresses. After hearing the throb, she looks around and notes that 'none of the women shows even the smallest glimpse of a knee, and some not even an ankle; the flesh is fallen and the portal for sin' (p. 2). Brought back into the circle by something she has heard in the present, she considers the visual evidence of gendered clothing restrictions and remembers a piece of religious dogma she has heard in the past. Tirzah then moves her considerations to a larger social scale by recalling a phrase that Mair 'always' says: 'We are *in* the world, but not *of* the world' (p. 2). While for Mair this phrase is a reminder that her family's religion morally distinguishes them from those families who do not go to chapel, for the reader it also describes the context of Nonconformism's diminished cultural influence. The novel is set in the 1970s, well into the period of Nonconformism's 'fade', as Thomas puts it, into 'the background of Welsh life' after the Second World War.¹¹ We should note that not only Nonconformism but the influence of Christianity as

a whole faded in Wales after the war. In a 2004 interview, for example, the minister J. E. Wynne Davies described the church as being in an 'embarrassing position' and in need of 'a reawakening'.¹² In this cultural context, Tirzah's repulsion is a palpable expression of embarrassment at what she feels is the inappropriate sound of her mother's devotion. While she hears her mother in the present, she also remembers her mother speaking in the past. The remembered phrase reminds Tirzah that her family exists within the world's physical boundaries but outside its cultural conventions. The novel thus invites us to notice that Tirzah is at odds with the chapel community in the same way that the community is at odds with its contemporary culture: she is 'in' but not 'of' the chapel, and the chapel is 'in' but not 'of' the wider world, remaining what Thomas calls a 'distant echo' of a once widespread social phenomenon.¹³ The episode continues to build an atmosphere of oppression through sensory details, until Tirzah leaves the prayer circle when a man breaks wind.

Later on, there is a repulsion whose cause is more explicitly sonic. The congregation has gathered in the chapel to pray for Tirzah's friend Osian, who is being denounced by his father, Mr Evans, for having had a wet dream. When Mr Evans begins to speak, 'his voice over-filled the small room' (p. 78). The congregation's 'whispered prayers' were 'scurrying insects on a bare floor'. Pastor tries 'nasally' to talk over the 'rumbling voice' of Mr Evans, but he 'went on, walking over Pastor's mild words as if they were no more than weeds on the path he'd chosen to take' (p. 78). At this point, Tirzah is repulsed. She 'slipped her hand into the crook of her mother's arm. I want to go, Mam, she'd said in an undertone. But her mother didn't react' (p. 78). Her mother either doesn't hear or doesn't care, and Tirzah remains within the prayer circle to hear the next sound, of Mr Evans 'pulling out a carrier bag from under his chair'. For Tirzah, 'the crackling of the plastic sounded so out of place, [she] wanted to put her free hand over her ear' (p. 78). Perhaps, being plastic, the bag is unnatural, and thus repulsive to nature-loving Tirzah's ears. The bag contains the bedsheet Osian has (naturally) stained, and Mr Evans points to the stain while quoting from the Bible in 'a voice both harsh and thready' (p. 80). Osian is so mortified by this incident that he can't move. Tirzah calls 'urgently' to him 'underneath Mr Evans's forceful reading'. 'You don't belong in this place', she shouts, but Osian does not respond, and Tirzah feels 'herself being carried ... out of the room', and having a peculiar sonic experience:

Now Tirzah becomes aware of strange music all around her. It is a continuous, lilting sigh, a thousand-stringed hum that she understands is the mountain's voice. She is soothed by it, almost held inside it like a small creature would be held in a cocoon (p. 80)

Rather than physically leaving the prayer circle, she is 'carried' into a mental flight, where she is happily enclosed within sound. Augoyard and Torgue call this effect 'envelopment': 'the feeling of being surrounded by a body of sound that has the capacity to create an autonomous whole ... The accomplishment of this effect is marked by enjoyment.'¹⁴ In *TTPC*, envelopment is the antidote to repulsion. As a fictional device, it articulates the love of nature that marks Tirzah as socially unusual.

Both the repulsion and the envelopment are rooted in Tirzah's sensitivity to what Alexander G. Weheliye calls 'the sonorous materiality of the aural' – the sense of sound as a tangible, textured vibration.¹⁵ The chapel appeals to this 'sonorous materiality' within its walls, when preachers embark on the *hwyl*, choirs sing and pipe organs are played. Outside the chapel, though, the enjoyment of sound as a physical experience is frowned upon. As Weheliye might put it, the culture of Tirzah's chapel engages in 'stifling and silencing embodiment [and] sensuality'.¹⁶ This attitude is not an essential feature of Nonconformity as a whole: Thomas notes that the Nonconformist writers Glyn Jones and Pennar Davies, for example, practised their religion with 'the ecstatic belief that the Creator was manifest in the sublime fertility and bizarre inventiveness of His sensuous creation'.¹⁷ The pulpit's audible shadow is not the same wherever it falls. The sect to which Tirzah's family belongs, however, is one that strongly disapproves of sensuous engagement with nature. Tirzah's regular experiences of sound as a kind of forbidden pleasure increase the tension between her and the people she lives amongst. She is at home within the sound of the mountain, but she has to live within the sound of her family. The sonic effect that best articulates her domestic tensions is filtration.

Filtration¹⁸

Augoyard and Torgue define filtration as 'a reinforcing or weakening of specific frequencies' of a sound that occurs when that sound passes

through a physical barrier. A basic example is when voices in an adjacent room are filtered through the intervening wall and heard as if muffled.¹⁹ Since filtration is audible alteration, novelists sometimes use it as 'the basis for shaping relations between individuals.'²⁰ In other words, characters might hear filtered sounds during moments of change in their relationships. In *TTPC*, the interpersonal properties of filtered domestic sounds are most evident in Tirzah's relationship with her father, Gwyllim.²¹

Tirzah judges Gwyllim's moods by listening to the sounds he transmits through the house's filters.²² The importance of this habit is established when Tirzah goes to her cousin Biddy's house. They sit on the sofa while rain 'throws itself at the sash windows, rattling the frames' (p. 15). Tirzah thinks of how much she enjoys Biddy's back garden, and remembers when Gwyllim 'concreted over the earth' in her own garden 'two summers ago':

Tirzah and her mother stood at the kitchen window holding hands as [Gwyllim] slashed the coloured heads off all the flowers. Let this be a lesson to you womenfolk, he yelled ... banging the window with his filthy knuckles. They could not hear him clearly, but Tirzah recalls the look of his mouth and the sweat on his forehead as he went on about women and their fleshy, indulgent ways. (pp. 16–17)

When the rain outside Biddy's house audibly 'rattles' the living room window, Tirzah remembers how she and her mother were emotionally rattled by Gwyllim's destruction of the garden two years previously. The remembered kitchen window filters out most of the specific words that Gwyllim yells. Although Tirzah could not 'hear him clearly' as he destroyed their garden, he makes clear that he intends to teach 'women-folk' a 'lesson' about the sins of the body by destroying the plants.

Filtration is thus strongly associated with sensuality, and this association recurs later, after Tirzah's parents discover that she has gone to the forest to meet the 'prince of crows' referred to in the novel's title: a boy called Brân, whose name is the Welsh word for crow. When she returns home from the forest, Tirzah is sent to her father in his study. Beforehand, she lingers in the hallway to listen to the clock in the living room emit 'its usual uneven *tick-tock*'. She describes this sound as 'fighting – fast, then slow, fast, then slow – always the same', and

simultaneously hears ‘the faint noise of her mother washing the kitchen floor’ from behind a door (p. 147). Tirzah’s positioning as a listener who considers two sounds emerging through two filters demonstrates another function of filtration according to Augoyard and Torgue: ‘listening through a filtering partition [plays] a role in behaviour rules [and] self-reflection.’²³ They illustrate this claim with an extract from Marcel Proust’s novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*, whose protagonist sometimes taps on his bedroom wall to communicate with his grandmother in the next room. Although this activity is supposed to be self-soothing, it causes the protagonist to experience a sense of ‘contact’ and a ‘state of anxiety’ at the same time.²⁴ In other words, the tapping is an auditory practice by which the protagonist develops his relationships with his family and himself.

Something similar happens during Tirzah’s episodes of filtered listening in *TTPC*. The incident described above, like the incident in Proust, includes an ambiguous emotional blend. The living room door filters the sound of the clock, which is ‘always the same’, and which therefore offers a sonic analogy for Tirzah’s constant monitoring of her father’s moods. The ‘uneven’ quality of the ticking reflects Tirzah’s struggle against the social constraints of her family and community. Alongside the clock sound, Tirzah hears the ‘faint noise’ of her mother cleaning the kitchen floor. Tirzah never hears her father doing any cleaning, and the quietness of her mother’s activity makes audible the stereotypical gender divisions that form part of the patriarchal norms against which Tirzah struggles. The cleaning sound also offers an implicit disapproval of Tirzah’s failure to adhere to the family’s standards of physical and moral cleanliness by visiting the forest with Brân.

Tirzah then climbs the stairs to see her father. After she ‘quietly’ calls to him and knocks on his door, she waits for a response. But Gwillym does not speak:

[F]rom inside the room there is a silence so profound that it seems to press like deep water on her eardrums. Can I come in, Dada? She asks, tapping with her fingertips, pressing her straining ear to the door ... She waits a few seconds, then taps again. I’m going now, Dada, she says, her lips against the wood. Goodbye. Someone is moving in the room, but nothing else happens. (p. 147)

Here, the door is given the role of physical and interpersonal filter: as it transmits sound between Tirzah and her father, it also exhibits those 'relation shaping' characteristics that Augoyard and Torgue argue are the key properties of filtration in novels. Gwyllim's excessive quietness contrasts sharply with his treatment of the kitchen window – 'banging' on it with 'filthy knuckles' – which Tirzah remembered earlier. But his quietness is as aggressive as his loudness: Tirzah feels a pressure like 'deep water' on her eardrums, a pressure that is physically palpable through the filter, and emblematic of the trouble she is in. In contrast to her father, Tirzah touches the house's sonic filters with the same sensuous attention she applies to her explorations of nature. Like Proust's narrator, she uses her fingertips to tap the door, then touches the door's wooden surface with the outer part of her ear, 'straining' to use the door as a sound-source with a technique that the artist Laurie Anderson calls 'conductive listening'.²⁵ After hearing her father moving around in his oppressive silence, Tirzah presses her lips against the wood of the door, investigating the simultaneously tactile and audible dimension of her father-daughter relationship by exploring the physical qualities of the intervening filter. The text makes clear that Tirzah's lips rest not against 'the door' but against 'the wood'. This specific material, that shapes the audible dimensions of Tirzah's domestic relationships, also helps to demonstrate that her body – what the chapel's sermons call her 'flesh' – is more than a 'portal for sin': it is an opening to nature and a vehicle for sonic experience. Speaking to her father with her lips against the wood, Tirzah implicitly acknowledges the door's origins in a forest – the same kind of environment in which she committed the social transgression she has been summoned to her father's study to explain. While her family tries to keep her away from nature, she reveals how this same nature cannot be kept away from the house. The family's vulnerability to what it considers undesirable is dramatised elsewhere by another sonic effect: intrusion.

Intrusion

Pop music is an intrusive force in Tirzah's community. As defined by Augoyard and Torgue, intrusion is a 'psychomotor effect linked to territoriality'.²⁶ In other words, intrusive sounds alert minds and bodies to the possibility of violation. Intrusion arises when 'the inopportune

presence of a sound or group of sounds inside a protected territory creates a feeling of violation of that space, particularly when it occurs in the private sphere. In some pathological states, voices and sounds are perceived as illegitimate intrusions in the body.²⁷ Pop music is a 'group of sounds' that intrudes into Tirzah's world twice – first when it violates the 'protected territory' of Tirzah's home, then later when it violates her chapel building. Historically, this form of music caused conflict with some Nonconformist cultures. The BBC documentary *Wales in the Seventies* describes how 'the exciting world of clothes and pop music shared by teenagers at school was often regarded by families as a dangerous threat to their chapel values'. One of the documentary's subjects, Hazel Thomas, describes growing up in the village of Drefach. She was dancing to pop music in her bedroom when her mother, returning to the house, saw Hazel through the window. 'She came charging ... up the stairs to the bedroom before I could have a chance to turn the music off and slapped me.'²⁸

Pop music in Tirzah's house is tolerated but still regarded as highly intrusive. It is first heard when the family agree to house a homeless man, Derry, whom they consider to be 'one of the lost' because he doesn't practise their religion (p. 112). After Derry arrives, surprising the family because he is nineteen years old and not the much younger 'boy' they had expected, he goes upstairs to his room. In the kitchen Tirzah hears 'the music from Derry's radio tumbling down the stairs and seeping under the door. Never before has this sort of sound been allowed in the house. The beat is keeping time with her heart' (p. 112). Imagined first as a solid object capable of 'tumbling', the sound then becomes a liquid that 'seeps' into the kitchen. Both the tumble and the seep are kinds of disorderly motion that articulate the boundary violation necessary for the feeling of intrusion. The protected territory of the house might have contained or diluted the sound through filtration, but the pop music strangely bypasses all the filters and seems to seep 'under' the door. The beat of the music keeps time with Tirzah's heart, maintaining its presence within her body. The pop music's appeal to the body, we gather, is one of the reasons why the chapel disapproves of it so strongly.

After the incident in the kitchen, Derry's presence in the house is summed up in primarily audible terms: 'Tirzah hardly ever sees him. Still, the smell of him, his hissy sort of whistling and the sound of the radio remind her there is a stranger in the house' (p. 116). Derry's

speech and behaviour are also audibly intrusive. For example, Tirzah looks out of the bathroom window while Gwyllim, in the garden, invites Derry to a chapel meeting. 'She heard Derry say without emphasis, Isno' gonna 'appen mate, save your breath. [She] wanted to cry at the brave, dipping movement of her father's chin and the way he stood for a minute, humming, before disappearing back into the house' (p. 117). Derry's calm refusal, spoken 'without emphasis', is as effortless as the pop music that intruded into the kitchen. When Tirzah sees and hears this relation-shaping incident through the filter of the bathroom window, her father remains unaware of her sympathy for him as he attempts to soothe himself and re-establish his sonic territory by humming.²⁹ Tirzah then watches Derry 'cough up phlegm and spit it into the garden's only patch of flowers', violating the physical space of the garden (in its most symbolically resonant area) as he has violated the audible space of the home (p. 117).

When pop music intrudes into the chapel – in a chapter whose epigraph is from Job 11. 14, 'Let Not Wickedness Dwell in Thy Tabernacles' (p. 232) – it is louder and more shocking than it was in Tirzah's house. Tirzah and her family attend a service after the congregation have learned that Tirzah is pregnant, but do not know that the father is Brân, the boy she continues to meet in the woods. While they once applauded Tirzah for her apparent commitment to their cause, even if she was occasionally wayward, the congregation has now turned against her and her family because of the pregnancy. Manon Ceridwen James argues that such ostracisation of young and unmarried pregnant women is 'an iconic image of Welsh chapel culture'.³⁰ *TTPC* uses pop music to dramatise this cultural image.

At the chapel door, Gwyllim says to Mair and Tirzah that they must sit through the service 'to see if the hundreds of fine words [they] hear each Sunday are actually true' (p. 234). When Tirzah joins in with the singing, 'her voice comes out in a bleat', and during the sermon, she 'cannot understand a word Pastor is saying' (p. 234). The congregation's hostility, rooted in the attempt to protect its moral territory from the intrusion of Tirzah's pregnancy, diminishes her normally acute powers of listening and reduces her song to the call of an animal. She then 'becomes aware of a disturbance outside. [She] thinks she can hear pop music, but that is so unlikely she dismisses it' (p. 235). She hears someone 'kicking the chapel door', and 'a havoc of shouting and scuffling' (p. 235). Then suddenly:

[T]he big chapel door is flung open, and the unmistakable sound of a pop song tumbles into the shocked room. Tirzah forces herself to look round. There ... Brân stands. On his shoulder he is carrying a blaring cassette player. He wears a headdress of ferns and feathers ... A dog is jumping, its barks like gunshots ... Tirzah thinks she feels ... crows sweeping into the chapel ... She thinks she can hear, over the music, their squawking laughter. She is cold and shaking. It is as if Brân is the living proof of all her secret wrongdoing. (p. 235)

Pop music here retains the disorderly, ‘tumbling’ motion it had when emerging from Derry’s radio, but now it is much louder, ‘blaring’ into the ‘shocked’ room. The accompanying dog’s barks are like ‘gunshots’ that amplify the violence of the intrusive sonic ensemble centred on Brân’s cassette player. With his ‘headdress of ferns and feathers’, Brân gives his contemporary musical blasphemy a crown of nature, making his intrusion visually as well as audibly symbolic. Tirzah thinks she can hear crows – the pets Brân adopted when he began to live in the woods – laughing over the music, a mocking accompaniment to her physical feelings of discomfort, shock and shame.

The sonic assault continues: ‘Brân stalks down the aisle, the music throbbing. [He reaches] the area where the four elders sit on tall chairs. God is up my arse! he shouts, wiggling his backside and turning the volume on the cassette machine to maximum’ (p. 236). Brân can increase loudness with ease, and he maximises the cassette player’s volume at the same time as he causes maximum offence to the congregation’s oldest and most authoritative members. Somebody faints, and Pastor shouts ‘let us help you’ to Brân, ‘over the barking dog and the beat of the music’; but Brân keeps ‘whooping and waving his free hand in the air. Fuck off, you religious nutter, he yells [at Pastor]’, before Gwyllim finally grabs Brân and ‘switches the cassette player off’ (p. 236). Immediately, a ‘sudden silence, like a huge white cloud, fills the room’ (p. 237). In this loudest sonic incident in *TTPC*, recorded pop music provides the driving force behind the prolonged intrusion of contemporary culture and nature into the chapel’s social and sonic environment. The congregation are shocked into listening as ‘one of the lost’ audibly violates their sacred sonic territory. Pastor’s shouted exhortations are futile. The force of recorded music, electronically amplified, overpowers the unamplified vocalisations of the

congregation. The men of the congregation, as if to emphasise the diminished influence of their faith and their vulnerability to contemporary sound, are paralysed. The congregation can neither sonically defeat the cacophony nor audibly persuade its producer to stop. Gwyllim only intervenes after Mair nudges him and says 'shift yourself, for the love of God' (p. 236). After Gwyllim switches off the cassette player, the resulting silence 'fills the room'. It is Mair, not Gwyllim, who provides the impetus to stop the intrusion and thereby re-establish the chapel's sonic territory. She thus prompts Gwyllim to obey the injunction of the chapter's epigraph: by switching off the 'blaring' cassette player, he banishes the audible 'wickedness' of Brân from their 'tabernacle', that is, the chapel. The resulting silence is conceived in visual terms: it has the bright and expansive purity of a 'white cloud'. The symbolism here suggests that Gwyllim, prompted by Mair, has redeemed his family in the eyes of the congregation by audibly banishing Brân with another of *TTPC*'s complex sonic features: silence.

Silence

Explorations of silence are a contemporary trend: in the last decade, essays and memoirs such as Erling Kagge's *Silence: in the Age of Noise* and Sarah Maitland's *A Book of Silence* have been bestsellers. These books oppose silence to 'noise' and posit the cultivation of silence as an antidote to contemporary life's overloads of sensory input and information. As Kagge puts it, silence lies 'deep beneath a cacophony of traffic noise and thoughts, music and machinery, iPhones and snow ploughs'.³¹ *TTPC* offers a response, in fiction, to these popular considerations of silence: there is roughly one silence for every seven pages, and they all have different audible and emotional qualities. The silences Tirzah hears are crucial for her development, but they are not always opposed to noise. To explore the meaning of *TTPC*'s silences, I draw on the ideas of the composer Pauline Oliveros and the Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh.³² It may seem more appropriate, given Tirzah's religious upbringing, to explore her silence in a Christian context. The German theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart, for example, argued that the word of God was best heard 'in stillness and in silence: there we can hear it, and there too we will understand it aright'.³³ *TTPC* certainly

associates silence with spiritual stillness, but its conceptual boundaries extend beyond those most often outlined in Christian theology.³⁴ The various silences in *TTPC* behave as sonic effects: they emerge from the interrelationship between an audible event, its environment and its listeners.³⁵

The first time silence occurs in *TTPC* is when Tirzah leaves the chapel, during the episode of repulsion, discussed above, in which she feels the 'prickle'. She leaves the prayer circle, leans against the chapel wall outside, and imaginatively transports herself into the gap between two stones. 'This is the kind of God I would like to have', she thinks, 'someone who could lie quietly between these stones with me. It is soothing to merge into everything' (p. 5). The association between quietness and a mystical, unmediated union with nature is established here, and this association will become more complex throughout the novel. While Tirzah is 'still slumped against the chapel wall', we read that 'like a radio being switched off, the shutting doors [of the chapel] silence a hymn abruptly' (p. 6). The doors have shut because Osian has come out to comfort Tirzah. He tells her that, inside the chapel, her mother has declared that Tirzah has 'an ungovernable heart' (p. 6). 'They've made you a matter for prayer again', he says (p. 6). The audible contrast between the hymn and the abrupt silence emphasises the difference between what the congregation wants for Tirzah – to be 'governable' – and what she wants for herself.

The abrupt transition between song and silence is compared to a radio being 'switched off', in a simile that prefigures the later incident when Brân's blaring cassette player is switched off in the same chapel. The simile also invites a comparison to other literary explorations of the relationship between silence, chapels and sonic technology. In Gillian Clarke's poem 'Radio Engineer', for example, a young girl listens, like Tirzah, from outside a chapel while her father, inside, prepares equipment for a broadcast. He 'hitched a microphone to the pulpit / and measured silence with a quick chorus / from the *Messiah*'.³⁶ A more conventional description of the father's activity here might describe him using the song to measure the levels of sound, but the poem amplifies the silence that seems to surround and outlast his 'quick' chorus in the empty chapel. Then the poem's speaker declares that, in the present, 'still I can't look at stars / ... without ... / calling "Testing, testing" into the dark'.³⁷ Thus she reminds us that radio waves, being a form of electromagnetic radiation, propagate from the earth

through space, and so whatever sounds are broadcast from the pulpit also travel towards the stars. The radio waves in Clarke's poem, as in real life, literally enact what Tirzah desires when she imagines herself between two stones: they 'merge into everything' as they travel. In her reading of this poem, Clarke intones 'testing' with a repeated high-low pitch pattern reminiscent of bird calls, audibly intertwining technology and nature.³⁸

Both Clarke's poem and Tirzah's imagination amplify the inseparability of sound and silence. As the American composer Pauline Oliveros writes, 'sound/silence is a symbiotic relationship. Sound and silence are relative to one another ... Listening to sounds means listening to silences, and vice versa.'³⁹ Writing of plural 'silences', Oliveros reminds us that silence is not a homogenous entity. Like Oliveros, Tirzah never hears silence the same way twice – her multiple silences are always variously weighted with material, social, natural and theological attributes. For example, silence 'snags' itself upon the 'ragged cawing' of a bird (p. 161), or 'nudges' Tirzah 'from every direction' (p. 333), or is heard after an enraged Gwyllim 'shouts' at Mair during dinner (p. 86). The silences usually emerge, like sonic effects, from shifting relations between sounds, spaces and the personal experience of the listener. The most important kind of silence in *TTPC* is the interior silence through which Tirzah develops her connection to nature.

In *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise*, Thich Nhat Hanh argues that 'the basic condition for us to be able to hear the call of beauty and respond to it is silence ... If we don't have silence in ourselves ... then we can't hear beauty's call.'⁴⁰ Throughout *TTPC*, there are key moments in which Tirzah intensifies her connection with nature through silence, until, at the end, the silent connection becomes a 'basic condition' of her experience. Once this development is complete, she demonstrates the benefits that Nhat Hanh ascribes to this particular kind of silence: 'enough freedom to enjoy being alive and appreciate all the wonders of life ... Free from ... regrets and suffering concerning the past, free from ... fear and uncertainty about the future.'⁴¹ Nhat Hanh, we should note, gains his freedom through a very specific practice of mindful meditation that Tirzah does not follow. Nevertheless, she strongly feels the kind of interconnection that is one of meditation's most prominent effects. In her highly individual way, she conceives of her interior silence as a kind of bird.

The conditions for the silent creature's arrival first emerge when Tirzah takes Osian to the forest, wanting to reconnect with him because he has become morose and unsociable following his denunciation in the chapel:

Tirzah and Osian walk in silence all the way up the narrow lane ... Once they are in through the first thinner ranks of trees, the woody quiet and scented gloom slows them down ... It is utterly silent in the forest, and warm. This is my chapel, Tirzah realises, gazing up to the living rafters overhead. (p. 121)

The silence here surrounds Tirzah and Osian as they walk into the 'quiet' of the trees. This quiet becomes another silence, which remains linked to other senses – first the smell of 'scented gloom' and then the feeling of warmth. The sonic experience of silence is thereby entangled with Tirzah's attention to the physical feelings in her body, one of the bases of Nhat Hanh's mindfulness. The phrase 'this is my chapel' appears in Tirzah's mind after a 'woody quiet' is followed by an 'utter' silence, which establishes the idea that silence will play a central role in her personal theology. The next time she experiences this kind of silence, the winged creature appears, enfolding her in 'a hushed embrace of feathers' as she lies alone in a field near the chapel (p. 198).

As *TTPC* reaches its end, the frequency of its silences increases, and some are a form of audible unease – a 'profound silence lying on the valley' (p. 352) and the 'serious, silent' mountains (p. 358) – that help to establish the appropriate atmosphere for the unsettling events before the novel's conclusion. Tirzah has given birth to her child, but she hasn't had any contact with Brân for a long time. When she visits the woods, she discovers Brân's body hanging from a tree, with crows 'silently feasting on his semi-frozen flesh' (p. 381), and 'a silence like the end of everything crushing her' (p. 382). The birds don't 'squawk' or 'caw' as they have done elsewhere in the narrative. Their silence emphasises the fact of their 'prince', Brân's death. While Tirzah at first feels emotionally 'crushed' as she witnesses this scene, she soon experiences a spiritual epiphany prompted by a liminal sound: 'on the edge of hearing, a voiceless song mingles with the snow-muffled silence, neither breaking nor filling it' (p. 383). The song here exemplifies what Oliveros calls the 'symbiotic' relationship between sound and silence. The strange 'voiceless' sound doesn't dispel or

disturb the 'snow-muffled', naturally weighted silence. The two audible phenomena exist together, 'mingled' at the uncertain threshold of hearing.

Then comes Tirzah's epiphany, the event referred to in the chapter's sound-focused epigraph from 1 Chronicles 16. 33, 'Then Shall the Trees of the Woods Sing Out': 'so the boundless world is all things, both good and bad, she thinks ... And I am part of it ... and so are all the people I love, and beyond them, all the folk I will never know' (p. 384). In this epiphany, which is also the culmination of the various silences that have been building in the atmosphere of the novel's final moments, Tirzah is able to articulate, to herself, her personal theology: the idea that all people and things are necessarily and unavoidably interconnected. Good and bad, like sound and silence, exist in a symbiotic relationship. This idea of interconnection is a definitive rejection of her mother's insistence that she and their family are 'in' but not 'of' the world. Tirzah realises, like Nhat Hanh, that she is somehow a 'part of' all the things and people in the 'boundless' world, and that therefore, to condemn the behaviour of other people is also to condemn oneself. She then becomes aware of the 'shining white presence that visited her on silent wings one evening long ago. The open fields and wild places are its home, and yet she senses it inside her' (p. 384). We can read this as a sonic response to *TTPC*'s first words, spoken by Pastor: 'Behold, I see the Lord descending as a dove' (p. 1). Now that this silence, which represents the natural world outside the chapel, resides inside her, Tirzah feels a 'wave of energy' that 'flushes her cheeks and expands her heart', and hears something beautiful: 'a sweet and lonely tune high up in the woods: thousands of branches are dancing in the chilly air' (p. 383). She runs 'effortlessly out of the woods and across the white fields' towards home, where her 'whole ungovernable life is ... waiting to begin' (p. 383). She can finally enjoy the experience that Nhat Hanh ascribes to his cultivation of interior silence: 'enough freedom to enjoy being alive and appreciate all the wonders of life'.⁴² Through a long series of sonic experiences, Tirzah has found a way to assert herself against the pulpit's audible shadow.

While *TTPC* also attends in great detail to the senses of smell, taste and touch, it is through the sonic dimension that characters, events and thoughts are most frequently and thoroughly entangled. This sonic dimension permeates a 'boundless' world, a more fitting home for the 'ungovernable' Tirzah than the anti-sensuous restrictions that emanate

from the chapel. The effect of repulsion, when Tirzah responds to unpleasant sounds in the chapel, articulates her aversion to religiously inflected social restrictions. The effect of filtration, by which sounds spread between rooms in Tirzah's house, mediates the tensions in her family relationships. The intrusive powers of pop music show how the congregation's outdated way of life is vulnerable to mainstream sonic cultures that it literally cannot keep out. Silence emerges as sound's necessary counterpart, a kind of audible presence that crystallises Tirzah's individuality at the same time as it affirms her interrelationship with nature and the 'boundless' world beyond her village. These few effects are not the only ones identifiable in *TTPC*. Its great strength is the abundance of its sonic intelligence. Through the portrayal of a peculiar, hard-line version of Welsh Nonconformism, this novel prompts us to reconsider the role of sound in social constraints. As we follow Tirzah's careful attention to sonic experience within these constraints, we apprehend sound as the multisensory agent of personal and environmental interconnection.

Notes

- ¹ Deborah Kay Davies, *Tirzah and the Prince of Crows* (London: Oneworld, 2018), p. 2. Subsequent page references will be given parenthetically.
- ² M. Wynn Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2010), p. 3.
- ³ Goronwy Rees, *A Bundle of Sensations: Sketches in Autobiography* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 24.
- ⁴ Emyr Humphreys, *Outside the House of Baal* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 73.
- ⁵ Manon Ceridwen James, *Women, Identity and Religion in Wales: Theology, Poetry, Story* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), p. 75.
- ⁶ Robin James, "'I Am Thinking Of Your Voice': Gender, Audio Compression, and a Sonic Cyberfeminist Theory of Oppression", *Sounding Out!*, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2018/12/17/i-am-thinking-of-your-voice-gender-audio-compression-and-a-sonic-cyberfeminist-theory-of-oppression/> (accessed 5 February 2021). James is referring to the sonic relationships in patriarchal cultures.
- ⁷ Jean-Francois Augoyard and Henry Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds*, trans. Andrea McCartney and David Paquette (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), p. 10.
- ⁸ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 10.
- ⁹ A listener travelling inside the vehicle hears no Doppler effect because they maintain a stable distance from the sound source.
- ¹⁰ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 98.
- ¹¹ Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, p. 308.
- ¹² Llewellyn Jenkins, 'J. E. Wynne Davies', *Contemporary Welsh Preachers Volume One: Where is Faith?*, ed. Llewellyn Jenkins (Norfolk: Leaping Cat Press, 2004), pp. 113–15.

- ¹³ Thomas, *In the Shadow of the Pulpit*, p. 308. Writers often use sonic metaphors to describe cultural influence. Thomas quotes Gwyn Thomas, who wrote in the 1980s of the evangelist Evan Roberts, figurehead of Wales's 1904 Nonconformist revival: 'he still rattles about inside the sounding shell of our experience' (p. 119).
- ¹⁴ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 47.
- ¹⁵ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (New York: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 34.
- ¹⁶ Weheliye, *Phonographies*, p. 34.
- ¹⁷ Thomas, *In The Shadow of the Pulpit*, p. 273.
- ¹⁸ This section of the article is adapted from my book, *Earwitness: A Search for Sonic Understanding in Stories* (Aberystwyth: New Welsh Review, 2019), pp. 80–5.
- ¹⁹ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 48.
- ²⁰ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 57.
- ²¹ This name is usually spelled 'Gwilym'. Davies's variant spelling perhaps emphasises that Tirzah's father's behaviour is relatively unconventional.
- ²² The same activity between daughter and father is aptly described in Trezza Azzopardi's *The Hiding Place* as 'trawling the silence' of a house. Trezza Azzopardi, *The Hiding Place* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 122.
- ²³ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 58. They relate their ideas to Michel Foucault's 'practices of the self', by which Foucault argues that the self consists, amongst other things, of a mental attitude and a 'set of practices', including such activities as 'gathering oneself', 'collecting oneself', 'treat[ing] oneself', 'emancipat[ing] oneself' as well as the general maintenance of one's relationship to oneself. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–82*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), p. 85.
- ²⁴ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, pp. 57–8.
- ²⁵ See Vincent Wozniak O'Connor, 'Silviphonics: Sound in Timber', *Journal of Sonic Studies*, 16 (2019), <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/457135/457136> (accessed 5 February 2021).
- ²⁶ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 65.
- ²⁷ Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, p. 65.
- ²⁸ *Wales in the Seventies*, dir. Steve Humphries (BBC One Wales, 2014), <https://learningon-screen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/080A3688?bcast=114652068> (accessed 5 February 2021).
- ²⁹ Suk-Jun Kim observes that 'humming puts us into a socio-acoustic cocoon ... Its effect is at first towards oneself who hums as its resonance soothes his or her body and its tune brings back memories.' Suk-Jun Kim, *Humming* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 4–5.
- ³⁰ James, *Women, Identity and Religion in Wales*, p. 41.
- ³¹ Erling Kagge, *Silence: in the Age of Noise*, trans. Becky L. Crook (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 2.
- ³² The composer John Cage's 1952 piece '4'33"' is the usual point of reference for discussions of silence. In this composition, a pianist sits at the piano and plays nothing for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. As Kyle Gann writes, this composition seemed to be 'an act of *framing*, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention' that offered its first audiences the chance to 'simply listen to what the American environment sounded like'. Listeners might eventually realise that there is always something to hear – 'silence' as the complete absence of sound is a physical impossibility. Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), pp. 3, 27.

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- ³³ Maurice O'C. Walshe, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Crossroad, 2009), p. 43.
- ³⁴ Of course, there are more forms of Christian silence than those articulated by Eckhart. Diarmaid MacCulloch, in *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Penguin, 2014), attempts a comprehensive survey of such silences. However, his survey focuses on collective, institutional silences, and includes very little discussion of the personal, mystical silences so important to Tirzah in *TTPC*.
- ³⁵ Augoyard and Torgue do not define silence as a sonic effect in itself. Instead, they offer a variety of approaches to silence through effects such as 'cut out' – 'a sudden drop in intensity' – and 'phonomnesis' – 'a sound that is imagined but not actually heard'. Augoyard and Torgue, *Sonic Experience*, pp. 29, 85.
- ³⁶ Gillian Clarke, *Selected Poems* (London: Picador, 2016), pp. 64–5.
- ³⁷ Clarke, *Selected Poems*, p. 64.
- ³⁸ 'Gillian Clarke', *Great Welsh Writers*, BBC2 Wales, 16 November 2014, <https://learning.onscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/080A06C1?bcast=114528485> (accessed 5 February 2021).
- ³⁹ Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (New York: Deep Listening Publications, 2005), p. 14.
- ⁴⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise* (London: Rider, 2015), p. 8. Note that this book's subtitle suggests, like Augoyard and Torgue, that silence is a variety of quietness, rather than a distinct entity in itself.
- ⁴¹ Nhat Hanh, *Silence*, p. 8.
- ⁴² Nhat Hanh, *Silence*, p. 8.