

The Sound of the Baskervilles: Sonic Clues to a (Literary) Crime Scene

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Abstract

This essay proposes a reading of A. Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901-02) from the perspective of soundscape studies. It applies the lexicon, taxonomy, and strategies of this field of study to the interpretation of the literary crime scene(s). To sustain its ideas, the essay takes into consideration a few other stories from the Holmes canon as well. The essay reveals the importance of the soundscape as a fundamental element not only in the economy of the investigation, but also in Doyle’s project of post-Darwinian restructuring of reality. So, together with Doyle’s need for rendering a coherent *vision* of the universe in his novel, the essay also considers his need for rendering a coherent *hearing* of the universe.

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1. A Study in Clairhearing?

The Hound of the Baskervilles by Arthur Conan Doyle (1901-02) is one of the most renowned Sherlock Holmes adventures and has been studied exhaustively for decades. It has inspired novels, film adaptations, and fanciful interpretations of every kind, soliciting attention both from fans and academics. It has even entered contemporary mythology to the extent that it is cited in professional fields other than literary criticism, sometimes in misleading ways. For example, Kathleen M. Eisenhardt writes:

Professor Golembiewski frames his comments around one of Sherlock Holmes’ most famous cases, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In so doing, he focuses on the singular importance of a nonevent. That is, the hound’s failure to bark signals key information that unravels the mystery. But there is a second and equally intriguing part of Conan Doyle’s story. That is, the story reveals an elegantly simple and even obvious explanation for the dog’s silence. The dog recognized the intruder. The stark simplicity of this reason is pivotal to the enduring power of the story. My comments hinge on this latter point. (350)

Had the two experts of finance and management here mentioned read the Canon, they could not have been mistaken about which dog did bark (the Hound) and which did not (the dog in “The Adventure of the Silver Blaze,” as we know well). Nonetheless, such *lapsus* has its relevance, since it confirms the “authority” of the Hound at an amateurish level, while inviting the authors of articles (whatever their discipline may be) to a higher level of accuracy—especially as far as hearing and listening are concerned.

My aim in these pages is to propose a reading of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* from a perspective which has yet to be thoroughly explored, that of soundscape studies. Although such a perspective is now starting to be adopted—Steven Doyle and David A. Crowder speak of “an emotional soundscape” in their

Sherlock Holmes for Dummies (165)—even the most distinguished scholar in the field, Philip Weller, has concentrated much more on sight than sound when inquiring into the origins of Baskerville Hall, the single places on the moor, and the ways the characters communicate. Others, such as Greg Buzwell, have focused on the Gothic nature of the “eerie landscapes” (not *soundscape*s) with a few interesting exceptions, such as Caroline Dalzell, who recognizes that “The guttural ‘uh’, ‘oh’, ‘eh’ and ‘ah’ sounds extenuate the severity of the landscape and echo its terrible influence” (17) or Richard J. Hand, who, in his introductory essay to *Listen in Terror* (a book actually devoted to the radio), recognizes that “the place of sound is inherently important in the work of the most influential of Gothic writers” and later specifically refers to *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (14-15).

As on previous occasions,¹ I have chosen to delve into the novel’s soundscape in order to apply the lexicon, taxonomy, and strategies of soundscape studies to the interpretation of the literary crime scene(s) described in this novel. To sustain my ideas, I shall also take into consideration a few other stories from the corpus of Sherlock Holmes adventures.

The Hound, as we know, represents Doyle’s response to his readers’ desire to have Holmes back after his supposed death at the Reichenbach Falls; however, as has been observed, its popularity also “suggests the satisfaction of other desires that Doyle shared with his readers, including a need for the rendering in detective fiction of a coherent vision of the universe in a post-Darwinian moment” (Frank 337).² In particular, Holmes and Watson share “a naturalistic, secular worldview still in the process of consolidating itself in late-Victorian Britain” and their perspectives include “playing the 19th century paleontologist,” the “biological reductionism of a Cesare Lombroso,” and “the Romantic materialism of a John Tyndell” (Frank 337-38). I should add an interest in geology to the list, given its importance at the time and given Doyle’s choice of the moor (which is much older than the legend of the hound) as a setting for this story.

As a meaningful example of the changing times, Doyle refers to Sir Hugo’s portrait which can be differently interpreted in the light of the theory of reincarnation or as an example of physiognomy, or even, we might add, as an evidence of the later discovery of DNA.

Holmes said little more, but the picture of the old roysterer seemed to have a fascination for him. . . .

“There is something of Sir Henry about the jaw. . . .”

“Good heavens!” I cried in amazement.

The face of Stapleton had sprung out of the canvas. (750)

What has not been studied yet, or so it appears to me, is the importance of the soundscape as a fundamental element not only in the economy of the investigation

¹ “A hiss is (not) just a hiss’: Sherlock Holmes, paesaggio sonoro e scena del crimine,” in *L’investigatore allo specchio: un approccio transdisciplinare al poliziesco*, ed. F. Saggini, M. Ascari (Bologna: Bononia UP, 2012), 165-175; “Crime Scene and Soundscape in Detective Fiction,” in *Keep an Ear On. Atti del V simposio FKL sul paesaggio sonoro*, ed. S. Giametta, F. Michi (Florence: Fratini Editori, 2013), 31-38.

² For further reading, see Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) and Rosemary Jann, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Detecting Social Order* (New York: Twayne, 1995).

but also in Doyle's project of the post-Darwinian restructuring of reality. So, together with the author's need for rendering a coherent *vision* of the universe in his novel, we shall also consider his need for rendering a coherent *hearing* of the universe.

The period in which Sherlock Holmes's stories were written and set is one of the most significant ages as far as sound is concerned. Despite the long dominating "visualist tradition" (Idhe 13), the Victorian age has been defined an "auscultative age" (Picker 7) for a series of reasons that finally gave orality/aurality a prominent role³—among these, the invention of the stethoscope in medicine, industrial noise, and the development of new technologies. It was an age "alive with sound" (4), and intellectuals—as often happens—were the first to realize this.

Though speaking of a "cultural history of *aural* subjectivity that has always run parallel to the representation of the intellect based on the surveying power of the eye," Gafijczuk admits that the *fin de siècle* is characterized by an increasingly "coherent relationship between the eye and the ear," a coherence that is nonetheless destined to a precocious crisis due the advent of the modern age with its dispersion of identities and things (4). However, he continues, silence and sonority come to surface in an unprecedented way. We must not forget that many of the greatest inventions of the years to come regard sound—telephone, radio, recorder.

In a time when, as Idhe puts it, "It is the *invisible* that poses a series of almost insurmountable problems for much contemporary philosophy" (14), the human ear becomes more refined and sophisticated and is gradually able to distinguish new sounds. As we read in a newspaper of the time, "The human ear is being continually perfected. . . . the growth of aural discrimination will be accelerated as the nervous sensibility of our race advances, and those who follow us will hear sounds, simple and compound, that are imperceptible to us" (qtd in. Picker 10). Also, it is the age of psychoanalysis—"the treatment with and *through* sound" (Gafijczuk 8)—and the phonograph, which for the first time separates the human body from his or her voice. No wonder that in 1891 young Arthur Conan Doyle sent an extraordinary short story to the *Strand Magazine* centered on this phenomenon and entitled "The Voice of Science."

Thanks to this new interest in sound, poetry and fiction rapidly acquired a new acoustic lexicon. On the other hand, the irrational and the supernatural were not totally absent, and we even find allusions to such elements in this novel. Irrationality has, in fact, been recently claimed to participate in, and not to have been excluded from, the Sherlock Holmes saga. In the past one tended to separate Sherlock Holmes adventures from Doyle's sensational and supernatural tales, but we ought not to forget that in the years when *The Hound* was published a lively cultural debate existed not only about human evolution, but also on subliminal consciousness. Anna Neill goes so far as to speak of the "supernormal interpretative powers of the detective" and of "supernormal vision," referring to the tale "A Case of Identity" (615-16). Maybe this is too far-fetched, but again, we could ask ourselves, what about supernormal *hearing*? The problem lies in the common idea that mental powers are more essentially connected to *seeing* than to hearing. If we read this passage, we can have an idea of the total lack of the latter while we find "observe," "see," and several visual descriptions:

³ This seems to contradict Stefano Pivato's more recent assumption that while the 20th century was "the century of noise," the 19th century was a century of "silence" (13). Actually, Pivato's book mainly refers to Italy and to "noise," while Picker underlines the increasing quality of listening in Britain in the latter part of the 19th century.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle at once references the interpretive techniques of criminal anthropology and pointedly links the activity of the subliminal mind with atavism. While the supposed agency of some otherworldly diabolical force is exposed as fraud, the man who discovers it is mentally and physically associated with the exceptional mental powers of his criminal opponents. . . . In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, . . . mental magic becomes quite explicitly linked with the theme of reversion. Doyle transports his detective hero from Baker Street to the Devonshire moor where, unbeknownst to Watson, he hides out to observe the goings on of the various suspects in the murder of Sir Charles Baskerville. Here, in the company of at least one criminal savage—the escaped convict—he is also camping amid the ruined monuments of pre-historic human culture. . . . The Neolithic wigwams out of which Watson expects to see crawl a “skin-clad, hairy man” instead house Holmes (77-78; ch. 8). This discovery is especially peculiar because it substitutes the detective for the animal-like criminal who himself seems a throwback to the “old savages” of the Moor: the convict has “an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillsides” (97; ch. 9). (Neill 620-21)

If we continue reading the article, we can acknowledge that sight becomes more and more prevalent:

Fixed upon the object of enquiry as Sir Henry is fixed in rapt gaze upon this landscape, Holmes also undergoes a physical transformation. When he is working on a case, his “intense mental concentration” has the effect of blotting out the memories that influence ordinary perception (160; ch. 15). This gift of self-hypnosis equips him with the marvelous vision that penetrates the secrets of the criminal mind. In Watson’s narrative, however, such vision also lends Holmes a supernatural stature. Before he reveals himself in the Neolithic ruins, Holmes appears to Watson one evening “outlined as black as an ebony statue on [the] shining background” of the moon (98; ch. 9). Too tall to be the convict, he becomes the mysterious figure on the Moor, the rival specter to the hound and the “the unseen watcher, the man of darkness” (105; ch. 10). (Neill 622)

Here, in fact, we have “gaze,” “vision” (twice), “appears,” “unseen,” and “watcher” in just a very few lines. True, Holmes is an “unseen watcher” (as it is true that he is a “voyeur” in “A Case of Identity”), but is it really just “clairvoyance” with which Holmes taunts Watson (624), or is there any space left for *clairhearing*? And should we be content with the fact that Doyle invents “a new kind of detective—a scientific investigator who also possesses the primitive gifts of supernormal vision” (624), or could we also wish to acknowledge such detective the gift of supernormal *hearing*?

In order to answer these questions, it is advisable to reread the Canon with an ear alert to the page. Clues are everywhere.

2. The Nocturnal Howling of an Invisible Monster

Even though Holmes's method is more dependent on sight than on the other senses—"I see it," "My eyes tell me," "You see, but you do not observe. . . . You have not observed. And yet, you have seen" (Doyle 162); "it is my business to know things. I have tried myself to see what others overlook" (192); "What an eye you have!" (376), etc.—if we read the Canon with due attention we shall find that the auditory aspect is fundamental both in the course of the investigations and on the crime scene. London itself offers an interesting soundscape made of wind howling, rain beating fiercely against the windows, and cabs splashing their way down the streets, and it is often through sounds that Holmes is informed about the arrival of a new client, both before and after the advent of electricity. For example, in "The Adventure of the Norwood Builder," our attention is "arrested by a tremendous ring at the bell, followed immediately by a hollow drumming sound, as if someone were beating on the outer door with his fist. . . . there came a tumultuous rush into the hall, rapid feet clattered up the stair" (496). In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Holmes discovers where the object of his search is hidden by having Watson "raise the cry of fire" (170), and later on he exclaims, "I've heard that voice before" (173). "The Boscombe Valley Mystery" is also based on a sound clue, the use of the Australian call "Cooee!" from the assassin in order to attract his victim (213). "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" offers a foretaste of the sound crime scene in the very first pages, when Holmes encourages his lady client to speak to him, assuring her that he is listening to her with the utmost attention: "I am all attention, madam" (259). And the woman's story is precisely focused on the report of a sound clue, a whistle that she heard on the night her sister died. Now the woman is going to get married and she is worried because she has slept in her sister's room because of some repair works and has heard the same sound again: "last night, as I lay awake, . . . I suddenly heard in the silence of the night the low whistle which had been the herald of her own death. I sprang up and lit the lamp, but nothing was to be seen in the room" (263). And the story goes on with cries and whistles.

Habit is an important element when examining (or listening to) a crime scene, as it is often the interruption of a customary practice that arouses suspicion first on the victim's part and then on the detective's part. These kinds of clues—the whistle calling the snake in "The Speckled Band," the dog not barking in "Silver Blaze," etc.—are called "environmental" and include all types of noise, sound, rustling, and so on, provoked by both human and non-human factors, and are usually perceived as *background*. In reality such elements often reveal meaningful clues.

And, of course, we must not forget what Idhe calls the "horizon of silence" (23), which participates in the construction of a soundscape since it is strongly marked by the act of listening. On this matter, we may even go so far as to distinguish between "pathological hearing" (which can be due to "misdirected perception") and "attentive listening" (Gafijczuk 10), the former being typical of Watson and of the other characters, and the latter typical of Holmes.

An example of an auditory crime scene is offered by "The Adventure of the Empty House"; in particular, I refer to the scene where Holmes and Watson are lurking in the darkness to catch Moran trying to commit murder. Even though in the end no crime is committed, Watson's report after a long period of silence is a perfect auditory description of a possible crime scene:

But suddenly I was aware of that which his keener senses had already distinguished. A low, stealthy sound came to my ears. . . . A door opened and

shut. An instant later steps crept down the passage—steps which were meant to be silent, but which reverberated harshly through the empty house. . . . Peering through the gloom, I saw the vague outline of a man. . . . I heard a little sigh of satisfaction. . . . Then his finger tightened on the trigger. There was a strange, loud whiz and a long, silvery tinkle of broken glass. (Doyle 491)

Coming now to *The Hound*, all suspense is constructed around a sound, the particular barking of a particular dog. Whether it is a hound or a mysterious creature is actually for Watson and Holmes to discover, but from the very beginning of the story we are alerted to the sense of hearing. True, we also have the strange lights in the moor,⁴ but who can resist the fear inspired by the nocturnal howling of an invisible monster?

Also, the hound's howling functions as an aural bridge between the past and the present, highlighting the dramatic legacy of a rape (a femicide, as we would call it today) that has crossed many generations to echo—or reverberate—in modern times. By giving voice to the hound, Doyle implicitly states (1) that the female victim of Hugo's lust might be still asking for justice and (2) that the hound is just a tool in the hands of the new villain. The fact that Doyle's novel opens the new century, being published in 1901-02, adds to its importance, since it is still rooted in an era of unprecedented technological progress (accompanied by the "general belief that the scientists could and would find an answer to every problem") while interpreting at the same time the *fin de siècle* sense of "decadent humanity" and dystopian future that will also characterize the new century (Clarke 138, 146). The soundscape of the novel well represents—much more than its imagery—what Clarke calls "the changing relationships between man and nature, between the individual and his society" (179).

3. Attuning to the Moor

As has been observed, "the detective must remain in the dark nearly as long as the reader" (Kissane and Kissane 358). It goes without saying that the expression *in the dark*, both literally and metaphorically speaking, only concerns the visual sphere, and not the aural one. As a matter of fact, Holmes must remain "invisible" while facing obstacles to his own vision (the night, the fog), but his perception of sounds must be very good indeed since the moor is obviously a hi-fi soundscape (Schafer 43), which implies it is devoid of noises, consisting of overlays of sounds that mask each other, a frequent problem in an acoustic (both real and literary) crime scene.

And while it is true that Holmes, the defendant of what Levine calls "the authority of science" (14), often refers to the importance of observation—for example, in Chapter 3 he says "The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes"—what would happen if we substituted "observes" with "listens to"? Also, let us think of the famous scene in Chapter 1 when Holmes and Watson try to decode the origin of the stick left by somebody in their rooms: although sight is almost sufficient here, in the following chapters the readers will have to realize that observation alone is not enough, so that the whole novel can be

⁴ An expert on this subject is Philip Weller, who has conducted personal experiments in Dartmoor together with his wife Jane. They have generously shared their results with the friends of the Italian association "Uno Studio in Holmes" on many occasions. Many interesting websites now exist which offer moor sounds, such as <<https://www.soundsnap.com/tags/moor>>, <<https://moorthanmeetstheeye.wordpress.com/>>, or <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qerEsnBmL8>> (19 Feb. 2017).

interpreted as a lesson in listening. In this way, not only facts but also *rumors* have a role: in Chapter 12, pretending to Stapleton that he has abandoned the case, Holmes reminds the naturalist that “an investigator needs facts, and not legends or rumors”—but, as I said, he is pretending—which means that also *rumors* have their importance. And what are rumors⁵ if not something that we hear with our ears? The importance of sound in the novel was intuitively grasped, if not totally understood, by James Kissane and John M. Kissane, who wrote, “The solution of the mystery is not intended to teach anything new or strange, only to demonstrate, to re-enact in terms of a situation at once concrete and idealized, the comforting drama of reason asserting its power in a natural world to which it is perfectly attuned” (360). This last verb, *attuned*, is no coincidence, but refers to the importance of sound and harmony (from *tune*).

The fact that the action (and the crime scene) moves from London to the moor is of a certain importance. While the city is chaotic and frantic, the country is usually perceived as peaceful and relaxing. This is also true as far as soundscape is concerned, and it was particularly so at the beginning of the 20th century, which has been defined the “century of noise” (Pivato). London was (perceived as) noisy while the moor was (or should be) quiet. Even though its geological qualities make it resemble what Idhe calls “*a realm of mute objects*” (50), a metaphysics of muteness would call attention to its also being a soundscape, and maybe claim that “silence offers a clue to the horizon of vision” (51).

This idea must have fascinated Doyle, who probably decided to use the moor as an experiment in questioning the commonplace preference for natural (as opposed to urbanized, and also including the allusion to the *supernatural*) environments. Such preference has been studied in relatively recent times by John Andrew Fisher, who writes:

The natural-sound preference can . . . be formulated as a preference for soundscape events that are natural over those that are artifactual. . . . Conversely, as we have already noted, many nature sounds are not considered in themselves intrinsically attractive, for example, a howling wolf, a magpie cackle, thunder, a honking goose, and the like. (31)

As Fisher explains, our listening is often causal or referential. In other words, the properties of the sounds we hear (with the exception of music) are not considered apart from what causes them: “how something sounds to us is a function of what we hear the sounds *as*” (33). To give an example, we hear *a dog barking*, not simply *a barking*. In Doyle’s novel, however, we miss the origin of the sound since nobody is able to localize it phenomenologically, and this is precisely what Holmes investigates. Things are further complicated by the fact that such sound might be *not natural*—it might be artifactual or, even worse, super-natural. I say *complicated* because “we habitually respond to natural sounds in a more favorable way than we do to similar sounds not heard as natural” (Fisher 38). In this context, the hound functions as a barrier to what Fisher calls a “holistic appreciation” (39) of the soundscape.

An analysis of the soundscape also allows us to better understand *The Hound* from another point of view. The examination of Holmes’s skull on the part of Dr.

⁵ *Rumour* derives from the Latin *rumor*, “common talk.” Curiously, the very similar Italian word *rumore* (from the Latin *rug-morem*) means “noise.”

Mortimer, the Neolithic huts on the moor, and the physiognomic interpretation of Hugo's portrait are, in fact, all evidence of Doyle's anthropological interest; nonetheless, along with James Clifford we ask, "but what of the ethnographic ear?" (12). The acts of hearing and listening are, as a matter of fact, also relevant from a soundscape perspective. As has recently been underlined, *The Hound* introduces a sort of sounded anthropology that has been mostly neglected by critics so far, the arena of which is the moor. Following R. Murray Schafer's intuitions, we can describe a soundscape as "the material spaces of performance and ceremony that are used or constructed for the purpose of propagating sound" (Samuels et al. 330) and the moor in *The Hound* responds perfectly to such definition. If the mire, the Tor, and the whole landscape concur in propagating the hound's baying, Holmes participates like a priest in a ceremony of hearing—or even better, is transformed into a "spirit of the moor" (Neill 625).

Long before studies in the rainforest were carried out, Doyle's moor functions as "a sensorially exceptional ecological environment in which one could hear further than one could see" (Samuels et al. 336). The murderous hound is, in fact, not visible until the end of the story, and this accounts for the absolute importance of *hearing* it and consequently interpreting and decoding its movements. Again, things are complicated by the fact that we hear the sound without seeing what originated it, and this is what we call "acousmatic sound"—that is, "a sound whose origin is invisible" (Chion 18)—or "schizophonia," a term that adds "a sense of anxiety about the separation of sounds from their naturally occurring contexts" (Samuels et al. 333).

Also, Holmes, who belongs to a post-Darwinian world, knows very well that "*everything* is always or potentially changing" and that even "The boundaries between species and varieties blur" (Levine 16-17). Consequently, an old legend cannot remain the same, just as a hound cannot be the same hound of the past. Holmes is therefore able "to deny permanent identities or sharply defined categories—even of good and evil" (Levine 17). If Darwin's world is a "tangle bank," as *On the Origin of Species* (1859) puts it, Holmes knows very well how to tackle it since he often uses the same metaphor in his adventures (e.g., "the tangled skein of life"). Moreover, Doyle seems to be much more aware of the importance of sound than Darwin himself, whose dependence on the "authority of observation" led him to privilege observation and investigation (Levine 210-11). As Levine writes in a chapter of his book entitled "The Perils of Observation," *observing* is not always an effective means of understanding reality since observation is the "observation of the self perceiving, not of the thing perceived," and we cannot deny that this forms the basis for Holmes's *science of deduction* (218). Nonetheless, the total absence of the sense of hearing in the pages of Levine's chapter crowded with such terms as *observation*, *vision*, *gaze*, *glimpse*, *inspector*, *spectator*, *see*, and *imaginative* is suspicious. The author rightly quotes Sherlock Holmes, who is "scientific in his capacity to read clues, to construct the fossil organism from fragments and traces" (222), but seems to forget that he is also a very careful listener. And although he goes as far as to acknowledge that the break between Victorianism and modernism is "a shift from belief in observation as authority to deep distrust of it" (235), he fails to recognize Doyle's great contribution in reasserting the importance of hearing and listening precisely in this period of passage. When he concludes his chapter by speaking diffusely of Western *imagination*, we cannot but regret the inadequacy of our own language since no audio equivalent for such word exists.

4. Browsing *The Hound*

The importance of sound in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* manifests itself most prominently in the moor, but it is anticipated in London in Chapter 1, when Holmes, after listening to Watson's attempt at explaining the stick forgotten in their study, exclaims, "Perfectly *sound!*" (Doyle 669, emphasis added), meaning *sensible, reliable, right*. Another hint is to be found in the idea that while sight may betray one's interpretation of reality—"I trust that there is nothing of consequence which I have *overlooked?*" says Watson (670, emphasis added), where *overlooking* means *failing to notice*—there is no equivalent as far as sound is concerned, which is confirmed in the English language by the fact that *overhear* does not mean, as some might expect, *failing to hear*, but on the contrary, "to hear without the speaker's knowledge or intention" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>).

In Chapter 2 we make acquaintance with Dr. Mortimer, who tells Holmes and Watson about the death of a patient (and friend) of his, Sir Charles Baskerville, from cardiac exhaustion—an explanation borne out by the post-mortem examination since nothing interesting was apparently noticed by the police on the crime scene. Only by pressing his client to tell him about the private facts will Holmes learn that the man suffered from a nervous condition (based on his fear that a dreadful fate overhung his family) and was scared of a legend regarding a devilish hound to the extent that "on more than one occasion he has asked me whether I had on my medical journeys at night ever seen any strange creature *or heard the baying of a hound*. The latter question he put to me several times, and always with a *voice which vibrated with excitement*" (Doyle 678, emphasis added).

The introduction of sound in the narration is strictly linked to fear and creates a framework for the characters' emotions which will last throughout the whole story. Each time somebody speaks of the most dreadful horrors surrounding the Hall, of the constant anxiety in which the protagonists live, we are actually struck by the *sound* of the dog; and it is not by chance that Mortimer describes the gigantic footprints he discovered on the crime scene in a *whisper* ("his voice sank almost to a whisper as he answered" [679]), which creates a link between the ominous *baying* of the hound and Sir Charles's *trembling* voice.

Chapter 3 opens with "a thrill in the doctor's voice" and continues with Mortimer saying, "Since the tragedy, Mr. Holmes, there have come to my ears several incidents which are hard to reconcile with the settled order of Nature" (679, 681). After some discussion about the inconceivable happenings, the chapter ends with Holmes asking Watson to hand him his violin. It is interesting that all the parts of the body mentioned here—mouth, ears, and hands—come to be linked to the sense of hearing. Nonetheless, Mortimer's voice conveys a sense of nervousness and fear, reinforced by the tales his own ears have heard, while Holmes's violin closes the chapter evoking the soothing power of music.

In Chapter 4, we make the acquaintance of Sir Henry, whose colorful exclamations—"By thunder, you're right!" and "Why in thunder should anyone follow or watch me?" (686, 688, and other "thunders" will follow)—not only betray the long period he spent in North America, but provide another clue to this "soundscaped" adventure of Holmes's. Thunder is an important element of the natural soundscape, a "geophony" (Schafer; Krause; Farina), but has also had great relevance in the history of culture since in ancient times its sound was considered a sort of message from a supernatural world.

Chapter 6 sees Watson and Sir Henry reaching Baskerville Hall, crossing the wild soundscape of the moor. They meet a "noisy stream which gushed swiftly down,

foaming and roaring amid the gray boulders” (Doyle 700), while “At every turn Baskerville gave an exclamation of delight, looking eagerly about him and asking countless questions. To his eyes all seemed beautiful,” but Watson cannot but feel “a tinge of melancholy” (700), a clear sign that the *eyes* alone cannot capture everything. And in fact a sense of gloom slowly covers the moor: “The rattle of our wheels died away as we drove through drifts of rotting vegetation,” to which we may add “the grim suggestiveness of the barren waste, the chilling wind, and the darkling sky. Even Baskerville fell silent” (701).

Notably, it is a sound (the *rattle*), and not something visible, that first introduces the reader into the realm of death and decay. On the way, they meet a soldier who informs them of the escaped convict, and again we receive the impression that sight is inadequate on the moor: “the warders *watch* every road and every station, but they’ve had no *sight* of him yet” (701 emphasizes added).

Once arrived at the manor, and after a light dinner, Watson retires to his bedroom: “I drew aside my curtains before I went to bed and looked out from my window. It opened upon the grassy space which lay in front of the hall door. Beyond, two copses of trees moaned and swung in a rising wind” (703). It is interesting to note that geophonies (the stream) and technophonies (the wheels’ rattle) have given way to biophonies, because the trees are *moaning*—like animals or human beings do. And finally, quite unexpectedly, a long passage arrives full of sounds, which closes the chapter, creating a very complex soundscape:

Far away a chiming clock struck out the quarters of the hours, but otherwise a deathly silence lay upon the old house. And then suddenly, in the very dead of the night, there came a sound to my ears, clear, resonant, and unmistakable. It was the sob of a woman, the muffled, strangling gasp of one who is torn by an uncontrollable sorrow. I sat up in bed and listened intently. The noise could not have been far away and was certainly in the house. For half an hour I waited with every nerve on the alert, but there came no other sound save the chiming clock and the rustle of the ivy on the wall. (704)

There are three sounds here (plus the “deathly silence”): a technophony (“a chiming clock”), a biophony (“the sob of a woman”), and a geophony (“the rustle of the ivy” due to the wind blowing). Of these three, the second one—“the sob”—is the most important, so important that it is artfully prepared in lines 1-3, defined through as many as six adjectives (“clear,” “resonant,” “unmistakable,” “muffled,” “strangling,” “uncontrollable”), described through onomatopoeia (“gasp”), evocative of a sentiment (“sorrow”), and capable of making Watson “listen intently” and stand up “on the alert.”

It goes without saying that, in the list of the sonic clues we are going to follow, this is the first and a very significant one. The fact that the sound is “clear” and “muffled” (a seeming contradiction) means that Watson cannot be mistaken and that the woman does not want to be discovered. Finally, the clock and the ivy form the symbolic sound-framework: the former marks the time passing, alluding to the fixed time of (indoor) logics and deduction, while the latter witnesses the irruption (from outdoors) of the wild—of dis-order—into the normal routine of life.

The following chapter, Chapter 7, begins with a cheerful morning, but soon the gloomy atmosphere is recollected thanks to Watson’s inquisitive dialogue with Sir Henry:

“Did you . . . happen to hear someone, a woman I think, sobbing in the night?”

“That is curious, for I did when I was half asleep fancy that I heard something of the sort. I waited quite a time, but there was no more of it, so I concluded that it was all a dream.”

“I heard it distinctly, and I am sure that it was really the sob of a woman.”

“We must ask about this right away.” He rang the bell and asked Barrymore whether he could account for our experience. (704)

Sir Henry thinks that it must have been the butler’s wife, yet Barrymore says that “the sound could not have come from her” (704). Watson knows he is lying since she is the only woman in the house, but he prefers not to insist and decides to telegraph Holmes (who is supposed to be in London) for instructions.

The bell and the telegraph are the means by which people are connected and communicate with one another, respectively indoors and outdoors. While the role of newspapers in the novel has been widely studied (see Calamai), the importance of house bells and telegraphy in the economy of the action has yet to be duly analyzed, also as far as the soundscape is concerned. Both *media* are in fact based on sound transmission and imply dynamics of gender, class, and education in order to be fully effective.

As the story goes on, sound reveals its importance also on the occasion of Watson’s first encounter with Stapleton: “Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running feet behind me and by a voice which called me by name. I turned, expecting to see Dr. Mortimer, but to my surprise it was a stranger who was pursuing me” (705).

The two engage in a pleasant conversation up to the point when the legend of the hound is mentioned:

“Of course you know the legend of the fiend dog which haunts the family?”

“I have heard it.” (706)

Stapleton has “heard” the legend—a new reference to *hearing*—but he wants to appear as a rational man, a man of science, and as such he cannot be considered a victim of superstition. He claims he is convinced that no hound exists and that Sir Charles died of a heart attack. However, after a while, the two of them witness the slow and painful death of a pony on Grimpen Mire, in one of the worst death scenes of the novel:

Something brown was rolling and tossing among the green sedges. Then a long, agonized, writhing neck shot upward and a dreadful cry echoed over the moor. It turned me cold with horror, but my companion’s nerves seemed to be stronger than mine.

“It’s gone!” said he. “The mire has him. . . .” (708)

Soon after, a new sound fills Watson with horror:

“Halloa!” I cried. “What is that?”

A long, low moan, indescribably sad, swept over the moor. It filled the whole air, and yet it was impossible to say whence it came. From a dull murmur it swelled into a deep roar, and then sank back into a melancholy,

throbbing murmur once again. Stapleton looked at me with a curious expression in his face.

“Queer place, the moor!” said he.

“But what is it?”

“The peasants say it is the Hound of the Baskervilles calling for its prey. I’ve heard it once or twice before, but never quite so loud. . . .”

“You are an educated man. You don’t believe such nonsense as that?” said I. “What do you think is the cause of so strange a sound?” “Bogs make queer noises sometimes. It’s the mud settling, or the water rising, or something.”

“No, no, that was a living voice.”

“Well, perhaps it was. Did you ever hear a bittern booming?”

“No, I never did.”

“It’s a very rare bird – practically extinct – in England now, but all things are possible upon the moor. Yes, I should not be surprised to learn that what we have heard is the cry of the last of the bitterns.”

“It’s the weirdest, strangest thing that ever I heard in my life.” (708)

This is the first time Watson encounters the hound’s baying, and this scene recalls to the reader (and possibly to Watson himself) the night when he heard the woman sobbing. In both cases we find the words *moan* and *strange*, but here the climax is higher and, despite Stapleton’s *nonchalance*, Watson is really frightened—and it is what he hears, not what he sees, that mostly upsets him.

Richard J. Hand has acknowledged the importance of sound as a link from the Gothic to detective tradition by creating an “eerie soundscape through the cry of an animal”: “The cry of the hound evolves from melancholy to menace. . . . [It] best encapsulates the uncanny auditory dimension of the novel . . . and it demonstrates the place of sound in creating a sense of nerve-wrecking mystery so integral to the detective genre” (Hand 14-15).

Things, however, are much more complicated. If the hound *visually* inhabits what Ihde calls “a region of the invisible” (105), when we turn to *auditory* space “the horizon does not show even such vague spatial significations except as thresholds of hearing. We are so situated ‘inside’ the auditory field that its indefinite extent is not detected primarily in spatiality. . . . in the ‘strength’ of sound a horizontal presence is discernible *temporally*. It is indeed the place where the auditory dimension of horizon is most dramatic” (106). And in fact the sound of the hound belongs to the time of narration more than it does to the space of the story, at least until we reach the end of it.

5. Safe . . . and Sound

The next two chapters consist of Watson’s reports to Holmes concerning the mystery of a light visible on the moor at night—a mystery that will find a solution when Barrymore’s wife confesses that the convict was her brother. What mainly interests us here is the report of Watson’s and Sir Henry’s night adventure on the moor to catch the convict, and in particular the contrast between the silence of the night indoors—“I sat up with Sir Henry in his rooms until nearly three o’clock in the morning, but no sound of any sort did we hear except the chiming clock upon the stairs” (Doyle 721)—and what they later find on the moor:

“I say, Watson,” said the baronet, “what would Holmes say to this? How about that hour of darkness in which the power of evil is exalted?”

As if in answer to his words there rose suddenly out of the vast gloom of the moor that strange cry which I had already heard upon the borders of the great Grimpen Mire. It came with the wind through the silence of the night, a long, deep mutter, then a rising howl, and then the sad moan in which it died away. Again and again it sounded, the whole air throbbing with it, strident, wild, and menacing. The baronet caught my sleeve and his face glimmered white through the darkness.

“My God, what’s that, Watson?”

“I don’t know. It’s a sound they have on the moor. I heard it once before.”

It died away, and an absolute silence closed in upon us. We stood straining our ears, but nothing came.

“Watson,” said the baronet, “it was the cry of a hound.”

My blood ran cold in my veins, for there was a break in his voice which told of the sudden horror which had seized him.

“What do they call this sound?” he asked.

“Who?”

“The folk on the country-side.’

“Oh, they are ignorant people. Why should you mind what they call it?”

“Tell me, Watson. What do they say of it?”

I hesitated but could not escape the question.

“They say it is the cry of the Hound of the Baskervilles.”

He groaned and was silent for a few moments.

“A hound it was,” he said, at last, “but it seemed to come from miles away, over yonder, I think.”

“It was hard to say whence it came.”

“It rose and fell with the wind. Isn’t that the direction of the great Grimpen Mire?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, it was up there. Come now, Watson, didn’t you think yourself that it was the cry of a hound? I am not a child. You need not fear to speak the truth.”

“Stapleton was with me when I heard it last. He said that it might be the calling of a strange bird.”

“No, no, it was a hound. . . .” (724)

The whole construction of the suspense concerning the hound is made through the soundscape. The two men have to face the evidence of a horrible sound, a sound which has no name, which may come from a distance or from near, which “rises and falls in the wind” and “dies away,” which might—or might not—be the voice of a bird. Again, it is something similar to a “moan.”

In Chapter 10 Watson—who does not know yet that Holmes was on the moor too—reports the facts to his friend in these words:

there are the repeated reports from peasants of the appearance of a strange creature upon the moor. Twice I have with my own ears heard the sound which resembled the distant baying of a hound. It is incredible, impossible, that it should really be outside the ordinary laws of nature. A spectral hound which leaves material footmarks and fills the air with its howling is surely not to be thought of. (727)

As for Sir Henry, “He is silent and distraught. His nerves have been strangely shaken by that sound upon the moor” (727). These passages are very important, since they show the way Watson dismisses his own capacity of hearing (“I have with my own ears. . . . It is incredible, impossible”). Yet, if he were able to put into practice what Holmes always tries to teach him, he would know that “once you have eliminated the impossible,” etc. So the hound becomes a hallucination in spite of its gigantic footmarks and in spite of what Watson has heard twice and Sir Henry at least once.

The fact that ear-witness is perceived as less reliable than eye-witness is the real issue here and as such ought to be problematized and solicit further study. Watson’s deductions are misleading not because he starts to believe in a supernatural being, but precisely because he refuses to do so. If he took into greater consideration his own *hearing*, he would *look* for the criminal hound instead of dismissing it as a figment of his imagination. And the killer (the hound) would lead him to the (human) offender, Stapleton. But of course the solution is only there for Holmes to find it.

And in fact, as soon as they are reunited on the moor (Chapter 12), Holmes simply tells his friends: “It is murder, Watson—refined, cold-blooded, deliberate murder” (743). Holmes has no doubt at all and will soon discover the only clue that is still missing—the identity of the homicide. But, before arriving at that, another sound interrupts their conversation:

“A terrible scream—a prolonged yell of horror and anguish—burst out of the silence of the moor. That frightful cry turned the blood to ice in my veins.” (743)

This time the *cry* does not come from the hound, but from his victim:

The cry had been loud on account of its vehemence, but it had pealed out from somewhere far off on the shadowy plain. Now it burst upon our ears, nearer, louder, more urgent than before.

“Where is it?” Holmes whispered; and I knew from the thrill of his voice that he, the man of iron, was shaken to the soul. “Where is it, Watson?”

“Where is it?” Holmes whispered; and I knew from the thrill of his voice that he, the man of iron, was shaken to the soul. “Where is it, Watson?”

“There, I think.” I pointed into the darkness.

“No, there!”

Again the agonized cry swept through the silent night, louder and much nearer than ever. And a new sound mingled with it, a deep, muttered rumble, musical and yet menacing, rising and falling like the low, constant murmur of the sea.

“The hound!” cried Holmes. “Come, Watson, come! Great heavens, if we are too late!”

. . . now from somewhere among the broken ground immediately in front of us there came one last despairing yell, and then a dull, heavy thud. We halted and listened. Not another sound broke the heavy silence of the windless night. (743)

It is very interesting that Holmes, “the man of iron,” is “shaken to the soul” by a sound. Obviously he knows that the hound—a real hound—exists and is afraid that Sir Charles may have been attacked, and probably killed, by it. He also knows that sonic clues are not to be dismissed, that they are evidences in their own right, and

that they will finally lead him to the murderer. The scene closes into silence—he silence of a windless night—after a brief description of another sound. This time, it is the hound, resembling the “murmur of the sea.” The wave-like baying of the dog is symbolically connected with two other sounds we have previously met: the chiming of the clock, which is characterized by a constant rhythm, like breathing (= life), and the mire into which the pony plunged (= death). In this very moment we do not know who the victim is, and neither do we know if he will survive or not. Therefore, the soundscape of the moor marks the dramatic moments of suspension between life and death and between the solution of the case and the mystery yet to unfold.

Nonetheless, a new question arises:

“. . . There is one very singular thing, however: How came Selden, in the darkness, to know that the hound was on his trail?”

“He heard him.”

“To hear a hound upon the moor would not work a hard man like this convict into such a paroxysm of terror that he would risk recapture by screaming wildly for help. By his cries he must have run a long way after he knew the animal was on his track. How did he know?” (745)

Holmes imagines that the convict must have known in advance that the dog was around the moor, and his suspicion is reinforced by their meeting Stapleton, who is worried that they may have heard the hound:

“Oh, you know the stories that the peasants tell about a phantom hound, and so on. It is said to be heard at night upon the moor. I was wondering if there were any evidence of such a sound to-night.”

“We heard nothing of the kind,” said I. (746)

By choosing not to admit that they did in fact hear the hound, Watson shows that he has finally understood the utmost importance of hearing and the implications of the soundscape in solving this crime.

In Chapter 13, however, Holmes has to explain to Watson that no jury would believe them: “how are we to get twelve stolid jurymen to know it? What signs are there of a hound? Where are the marks of its fangs? . . . we have to prove all this. . . . We never saw the hound; we heard it . . .” (747). Therefore, the two of them must think of a strategy in order to frame the offender. That is why, in the next chapter, Sir Henry is at Stapleton’s while Watson and Holmes are outside the house, trying to get a glimpse inside and guess—with the help of their sense of hearing—what is happening:

As I watched them Stapleton rose and left the room, while Sir Henry filled his glass again and leaned back in his chair, puffing at his cigar. I heard the creak of a door and the crisp sound of boots upon gravel. The steps passed along the path on the other side of the wall under which I crouched. Looking over, I saw the naturalist pause at the door of an out-house in the corner of the orchard. A key turned in a lock, and as he passed in there was a curious scuffling noise from within. He was only a minute or so inside, and then I heard the key turn once more and he passed me and re-entered the house. I saw him rejoin his guest, and I crept quietly back to where my companions were waiting to tell them what I had seen. (755)

Then the final phase of the adventure starts:

He dropped on his knees and clapped his ear to the ground.

“Thank God, I think that I hear him coming.”

A sound of quick steps broke the silence of the moor. Crouching among the stones we stared intently at the silver-tipped bank in front of us. The steps grew louder, and through the fog, as through a curtain, there stepped the man whom we were awaiting. He looked round him in surprise as he emerged into the clear, starlit night. Then he came swiftly along the path, passed close to where we lay, and went on up the long slope behind us. As he walked he glanced continually over either shoulder, like a man who is ill at ease.

“Hist!” cried Holmes, and I heard the sharp click of a cocking pistol. “Look out! It’s coming!”

There was a thin, crisp, continuous patter from somewhere in the heart of that crawling bank.

Holmes and I both fired together, and the creature gave a hideous howl, which showed that one at least had hit him. He did not pause, however, but bounded onward. Far away on the path we saw Sir Henry looking back, his face white in the moonlight, his hands raised in horror, glaring helplessly at the frightful thing which was hunting him down.

But that cry of pain from the hound had blown all our fears to the winds. If he was vulnerable he was mortal, and if we could wound him we could kill him. [...] With a last howl of agony and a vicious snap in the air, it rolled upon its back, four feet pawing furiously, and then fell limp upon its side. (756)

Once the hound is killed, Holmes can direct his attention toward Stapleton. He escaped, headed to the mire, but there he met his death. So Sir Henry is safe . . . and sound, and Holmes and Watson can return to Baker Street.

As I have tried to demonstrate, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* has still much to say, even in our contemporary age. It is an attempt to give a coherent idea of the post-Darwinian world, but it is also a study in the subliminal mind; it is an invitation to observe, but it also urges readers to prick up their ears. Soundscape studies can therefore help us add a new piece in the comprehension and interpretation not only of *The Hound* but more especially of the cultural, scientific, and forensic arena of its times.

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