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Introduction

Nicholas Royle has recently argued that an 'auditory dimension ... is crucial to a critical apprehension of "the uncanny"'.¹ Royle cites instances of 'eeriness in the ear'² at work in L.G. Moberly's story 'Inexplicable' (which is discussed but not named in Freud's 1919 essay), and finds similar effects operating in E.T.A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman' (1816), Freud's chief source for examples of the literary uncanny. Freud himself, Royle notes, does not mention that, in this story, 'the coming of the sandman is first of all something experienced *in the ear*':³ the arrival of the sandman, so threatening to Nathaniel, is heralded by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. This example indicates that it is, partly at least, the detachment of the sound from a perceived origin that is the source of uncanny feelings, but the footsteps also provoke anxiety about what is (or may be) to come. Royle's identification of this under-explored aspect of the uncanny has certain consonances with recent studies of the effects of technologies of the voice; pertinent for my discussion here are the connections that have been made between these technologies and the practice of spiritualism. Pamela Thurschwell has argued that nineteenth-century developments such as the telephone 'appear to support the claims of spiritualist mediums; talking to the dead and talking on the phone both hold out the promise of previously unimaginable contact between people'.⁴ The anxieties provoked by this promise are foregrounded by Steven Connor:

In twentieth-century spiritualism, the voice became the most important form of embodiment and manifestation for non-embodied entities: it was at once the most powerful and most versatile form of witness to the unseen. In this, spiritualism draws deeply on the experiences of modern acoustic technologies, both telephonic (transmissive) and phonographic (reproductive). Spiritualism attests and contributes to the ghostliness of these new technologies.⁵



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The strangeness of hearing different voices emanating from the same body has its corollary in the disembodied voices of modern technology. Neither type of acoustic manifestation can be labelled uncanny *per se*, but both are capable of producing uncanny effects, through the disruption of the accepted relationship between origin and voice.

In what follows, I will show how the auditory uncanny – which serves to produce what Royle calls ‘eariness’ – arises in Graham Greene’s 1943 novel *The Ministry of Fear*. The wartime city is a particularly apt site for the exploration (and indeed manifestation) of many aspects of the uncanny; Greene is not alone among wartime writers in drawing on the uncanny effects of sound and particularly the voice, but he does so to an unusual extent in this novel. More often, as critics including Mark Rawlinson and Adam Piette have shown, uncanny effects arise from estrangement in relation to one’s surroundings – one’s home is no longer ‘homely’ – while, at the level of representation, the extremity of what is witnessed ‘renders any description of a wartime scene incompetently inarticulate’.⁶ Piette cites Henry Green’s *Caught* (1943), in which Richard’s attempt to describe, in direct speech, the effects of bombing, is interspersed with a parenthetical commentary, another telling of the scene, in indirect speech, which undercuts his own inadequate version. The net effect of this, as Piette notes, is to place both accounts in doubt, rather than to privilege one over the other. This use of competing narrative voices is a reminder that what I am considering here are effects produced by reading; the time-lag which often occurs between hearing and understanding in *The Ministry of Fear*, or between cause and effect, is therefore related to the kind of delayed comprehension that is found in *Caught*. Indeed it could be argued that in *Caught*, comprehension is not so much delayed as permanently deferred: the voice never reaches its destination.⁷

Descriptions of the experience of the black-out or the Blitz often focus on sensory deprivation of different kinds, or, conversely, on sensory overload. Connor identifies a ‘bifurcation of visuality and hearing’⁸ that occurs during air raids; those on the ground are forced to ‘rely on hearing to give them information about the incoming bombs. The inhabitants of cities subjected to aerial bombardment during the Second World War and after have to learn new skills of orientating themselves in this deadly new auditory field.’⁹ Vera Brittain, describing the difficulties of finding her way about during the black-out, suggests that she was eventually able to ‘develop a sixth sense which is half way between the sense of touch and the sense of smell’,¹⁰ and which helped her to negotiate her way successfully. She also notes the estranging effect of bombing, which is expressed in her diary in terms of visual juxtapositions: ‘Even the most familiar streets are ceasing to be recognisable; I keep saying to myself: “What *was* this?” & forgetting what was there. Struck again by the usual incongruity of Western Front

ruin & almost next door beautiful flowers & smart hats in the still standing Bond Street shops.¹¹ George Orwell, during the same period, records: 'Nondescript people wandering about, having been evacuated from their houses because of delayed action bombs. Yesterday two girls stopping me in the street, very elegant in appearance except that their faces were filthily dirty: "Please, sir, can you tell us where we are?"'¹² The effects of an assault on a locale – a physical attack – are conveyed here in terms of their disjunctive impact on individuals, and on the individual psyche.

Not knowing where you are, a wartime intensification of the already often uncanny experience of living in the city, is also relevant to Greene, and, as I will show, is frequently redoubled by an auditory aspect. His protagonist, Arthur Rowe, has to attempt to negotiate his way through the bombed city, but also through an increasingly arcane spy plot into which he stumbles. Simultaneously, Rowe has to carry the burden of a guilty secret from his past. Greene goes to some lengths to exploit the often deceptive or at least disorientating qualities of communication by telephone, and Rowe is also the recipient of messages from 'the other side' when he finds himself in attendance at a *séance*. While the *séance*, and the visit to the fortune-teller preceding it, are on the surface theatrical, even comical devices, by which Rowe's past comes back to haunt him, I will show that there is in fact a continuity between these scenes and the use of disembodied voices elsewhere in the novel. While the voice from 'the other side' heard by Rowe, and his later amnesia, might appear to allow the down-playing of the historically rooted aspects of the novel, I will show that Greene in fact reminds us continually of the specific historical contexts from which these instances of the uncanny arise.

Telling the future, telling the past

Arthur Rowe becomes entangled in a plot involving Fifth Columnists and a missing microfilm when he goes to have his fortune told at a *fête*, having been drawn there, inopportunistly, by the 'distant blare of a band and the knock-knock of wooden balls against coconuts'.¹³ Immediately, Rowe's painful nostalgia emerges: 'The *fête* called him like innocence' (p. 11). Only later, when Rowe goes to consult a private detective, is it revealed that in hearkening back (literally, in that the cues to this are auditory), Rowe is apparently able to pass into a time before he became a criminal through the mercy-killing of his wife. Part of the effect of the novel is to expose the impossibility of returning, in this fashion, to a past uninfected by the shadow of what came after. Rowe's later spell of bomb-blast-induced amnesia, when he forgets about the killing, ultimately serves, as Damon DeCoste has pointed out, to emphasize that the 'war-torn present . . . itself

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endorses [the] heroic ethos'¹⁴ figured initially in the novel by Rowe's discovery of a copy of Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Little Duke* on the white elephant stall. Beneath the rhetoric of heroism and the apparent innocence of a child's story-book lie violence and death, and death also overshadows another ostensibly unthreatening entertainment, the fortune-teller's booth. 'So many fortunes one had listened to. Always, for a little while, one could half-believe in that journey overseas, in the strange dark woman, and the letter with good news. Once somebody had refused to tell his fortune at all ... that silence had really come closer to the truth than anything else' (p. 15). Although Rowe, recalling this refusal, glosses it as 'an act' (p. 15), there is a clue here to the later revelation of his criminal past: the ambivalent status both of the act of telling fortunes, and of Rowe's attitude towards it, is here revealed. Refusing to tell what was seen could be an indication that the particular fortune-teller in question did see what was to come – Rowe's killing of his wife – but chose not to speak it. But for Rowe, even the silence is eloquent: his future, and not solely the act of killing but its aftermath, is, precisely, unspeakable.

Throughout this incident, and later at the *séance*, the balance between fakery and truth is a fine one. Mrs Bellairs – the name suggestive of clarity, and of music, but also of the medium through which these sounds are carried – is wearing 'cast-off widow's weeds – or perhaps it was some kind of peasant's costume' (p. 15). The correction here (widow's weeds, after all, would hardly seem appropriate garb for a fortune-teller) indicates a visual double-take on Rowe's part. He is unable to quite make her out, and not only because of the darkness of the tent. Her voice, however, is 'deep and powerful: a convincing voice. He had expected the wavering tones of a lady whose other hobby was water-colours' (p. 15). The powerfulness of her voice makes up for the unconvincing nature of Mrs Bellair's half-seen costume; indeed the quality of her voice seems, to Rowe, to provide the guarantee for the truth of what is being said as she examines his palm, a guarantee that might, in other circumstances, be read off bodily gestures or appearance. Her actual words to Rowe are conventional enough, at least until she reminds him that he has 'made one woman happy' (p. 16), an occluded reference to his wife that causes Rowe to attempt to pull his hand away. He does not wish to hear about his past, at least not the aspect of his past to which she here alludes. His interjection, 'Don't tell me the past. Tell me the future' has a dramatic effect, however: 'It was as if he had pressed a button and stopped a machine. The silence was odd and unexpected' (p. 16). The parallel drawn here between stopping her voice and stopping a machine emphasizes that, paradoxically, because her voice does not 'waver', it seems somehow more (or less) than human. By extension, Mrs Bellairs herself becomes merely the receptacle, or as in her later incarnation, the medium for the voice.

Mrs Bellairs is acting under instructions to reveal secret information to whoever says: 'Don't tell me the past. Tell me the future.' Rowe's accidental enunciation of these words leads her to believe he is someone he is not: the voice, and in particular, the secret words, become the key to a mistaken identity, which Rowe unwittingly adopts. As Mrs Bellairs tells Rowe, she is forbidden by law to tell the future. Until the passing of the Fraudulent Mediums Act in 1951, both fortune-tellers and mediums were liable to be prosecuted under either the 1735 Witchcraft Act or the 1824 Vagrancy Act, neither of which allowed for a distinction between genuine and fraudulent practitioners – all were considered frauds. Although it was recognized that the activities of fortune-tellers could be of assistance in keeping up morale in wartime, any predictions or messages that seemed to present a threat to national security could result in prosecution.¹⁵ Rowe might believe that in asking to be told the future rather than the past he is encouraging Mrs Bellairs to bend the regulations; in fact he is spurring her on to set in motion a series of events that are indeed intended to threaten national security. An apparently harmless, if illicit, private transaction has public ramifications that Rowe cannot be aware of, and the question of the relationship between individual actions and the progress of the war is one that becomes increasingly important through the course of the narrative.

The connection between voice and identity is introduced and immediately problematized in this encounter with Mrs Bellairs. Rowe, uncannily, hits by chance on words which have a special meaning to Mrs Bellairs and her associates. In return, Mrs Bellairs gives him the information that will allow him to win the 'Guess the weight of the cake' competition. The blackly comic aspects of this encounter here come to the fore: when Rowe asks if the weight he has been given is the actual weight of the cake, he is assured that this is immaterial; he will win it in any case. Little knowing that the cake contains secret documents on microfilm, he sees Mrs Bellairs' tip-off only as what it seems to be on the surface. Wondering why he in particular should be given this hint, he presumes that she is 'backing a great number of weights' (p. 17) in the hope of sharing the spoils: 'Cake, good cake, was scarce nowadays' (p. 17). Only belatedly does Rowe fit together cause and effect, and realize that Mrs Bellairs has mistaken him for another; such a delay, as I have already indicated, is characteristic of how both perception and understanding function in Greene's novel.

On the telephone

Telephone conversations in *The Ministry of Fear* are often a further means of dramatizing these disturbances of perception. On a number of occasions, overheard telephone conversations, or halves of conversations, provide

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Rowe with hints and clues, but rarely with any clear or decisive information. Connor has suggested that the ability of the telephone to convey 'not only articulate sounds, but also all the accidental noise of the voice'¹⁶ works to increase the intimacy between the callers, but Rowe's own use of the telephone signals, for the most part, his isolation, rather than serving to unite him with his interlocutors. On more than one occasion, Rowe makes a telephone call in order to find out whether a particular part of London has survived the bombing overnight, seemingly attesting to Avital Ronell's description of the telephone network 'suturing a country like a wound'.¹⁷ Ronell continues, though, that the telephone 'participates in myths of organic unity',¹⁸ a comment which underlines the fact that a country must be wounded in order to need suturing in the first place. Rowe's telephone calls are largely cries for help rather than intimate social exchanges. However, the novel also occasionally conveys the sense of the telephone as a magical or uncanny instrument, and there are connections, to which I will return, with the calling up of spirits practised by Mrs Bellairs.

After the apparent murder of Mr Cost, for which Rowe has been framed, he spends the night in a public air raid shelter, and in the morning seeks the advice, by telephone, of the private detective Rennit. He calls twice: on the first occasion there is no answer: 'He could hear the bell ringing uselessly in the empty room, and he wondered whether the sausage roll still lay beside it on the saucer. . . . He knew now that part of the world was the same' (pp. 70–1). Rowe takes some comfort from the very sound of the telephone bell, which signals sameness and continuity (although even this is, to some extent, undercut by his wondering about the sausage roll). When he eventually gets through to Rennit and tells him about Cost's death, Rennit's feelings are articulated more clearly in sounds than in words: 'Mr Rennit wailed up the phone. . . . He moaned, "I never wanted to take up your case." . . . "You've got to advise me, Rennit. I'll come and see you." [Rowe] could hear the breath catch down the line. The voice imperceptibly altered. "When?"' (p. 72). The notion that the 'imperceptible' can in fact be perceived down the line fits with Connor's analysis of the amplifying power the telephone can have on the voice and the breath. An imperceptible alteration is enough to warn Rowe to approach Rennit with 'circumspection' (p. 73), but Rowe has already made an error by phoning to announce his arrival. When the presence of a plain-clothes policeman makes it impossible for him to enter Rennit's office, he again has recourse to the telephone, first of all contacting Anna Hilfe, who tells him to keep away, and then, in desperation, an old acquaintance, Henry Wilcox. 'There was just a chance there. . .if the hockey-playing wife didn't interfere' (p. 80). Finding Henry's number in the book does not necessarily guarantee that Henry is alive because 'the blitz was newer than the edition' (p. 80); the organizing and ordering capacities of the telephone system are

not immune to the effects of war. When Rowe dials the number, it rings, but Rowe puts the receiver down, realizing that he will have to make face-to-face contact in order to ask for Henry's help: 'He couldn't brandish a cheque down a telephone line' (p. 80).

Rowe here learns from his experience with Rennit; the ringing phone has provided evidence of Henry's continued existence, but Rowe decides not to announce his imminent arrival. He associates his friendship with Henry with the time before his wife's death, and prefacing the visit with a telephone conversation would seem pointlessly painful – he will have to meet him eventually to get his cheque cashed. The telephone seems here to be conceived of as a substitute for, rather than a supplement to, bodily presence. The ridiculous, but also rather sinister, image of brandishing a cheque down the line emphasizes this, and the telephone is left as a shadowy or inadequate means of contact. Yet Rowe has already used the telephone to establish the continued physical presence of buildings and by extension their inhabitants, thus undercutting the apparent prioritization here of bodily presence over the vocal presence conveyed by the telephone. When he arrives at Henry's flat, he discovers, to his horror, that Henry is in the middle of preparing for Mrs Wilcox's funeral, she having been killed in an air raid. On one level this is a cruel joke at Rowe's expense; if he had waited for Henry to answer the telephone, he would have found this out sooner. On another level, however, the death of Henry's wife indicates that Rowe has been mistaken in relying on the telephone system as a way of guaranteeing life, as well as providing a counterpoint to the death of Rowe's own wife. Later on, when Rowe is trapped in a hotel room with Anna, he tries to phone down to reception: 'He took up the receiver and listened . . . and listened' (p. 102). The line is dead, and this exacerbates Rowe's feeling of isolation, a suggestion underlined by the fact that he listens to the dead line as though hoping someone will be calling him, rather than speaking into it.

Towards the climax of the novel, Rowe accompanies the police to a gentleman's outfitters, where he overhears Cost, now reincarnated as Ford, making a call that should provide a key to the mystery of the missing microfilm. Rowe overhears Cost/Ford's side of the conversation, dealing, ostensibly, with the availability of cloth; it becomes evident, however, that a message other than the overt one is being delivered, and after Cost/Ford's suicide, Rowe's chief concern is to identify the recipient of the phone call. He decides to do this himself rather than to share his knowledge with the police, hoping to be able to 'boast like a boy to Anna' (p. 187) when he eventually tracks down the microfilm. He has gleaned the exchange and the first three digits of the number but has to proceed by trial and error to find the fourth. There is a flaw in this plan, however, as he realizes when he dials the first number: 'he couldn't expect to know Cost's customer by a

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sixth sense' (p. 189). His first call reaches a bakery, but after he has put the phone down without identifying himself, he realizes that there is no reason why this business concern might not be a front. When challenged during the next call by a voice 'so old that it had lost sexual character and you couldn't tell if it was a man's or a woman's' (p. 189), he resorts to claiming that he is from the Exchange, checking up on subscribers after the raids. Although this provides a suitable pretext, it further undermines the faith that Rowe has hitherto had in the telephone; it reveals an unexpressed fear that the telephone has flaws, that calls can be misdirected or that the system can fail in other ways. The disturbing feelings provoked by the anonymous, and in this case desexualized, voices reveals for Rowe the uncanny aspects of telephonic interaction. Capable of heightening feelings of intimacy through the transmission of every nuance and breath of voice, the telephone can also reveal the falsity of such feelings. When 'a torrential voice' (p. 190) at another number presumes he is an acquaintance and begins to share the story of a missing cat, Rowe finds the account 'fascinating' (p. 191); but he has no real emotional engagement with the story and is simply co-opted as its auditor, as though any ear would do.

Finally, dialling another number and listening to the bell ringing, he conjures up an image of the room he might be disturbing: 'What would a guilty room be like? ... This room would surely be trained to anonymity ... a wireless set, a few detective novels, a reproduction of Van Gogh's sunflowers ... a lonely room' (p. 195). Despite his disavowal, when phoning Henry Wilcox, of the possibility of physically reaching down the line, and despite the random and disconcerting nature of the other answers he has so far received, Rowe here allows the act of calling to take on the nature of a materialization, in a similar way to his imagining of Rennit's office. But the sound of the phone ringing is potentially a cause of anxiety because there is no way of predicting who will answer, and by imagining the room, Rowe attempts to dispel some of this anxiety and therefore dissipate the unease provoked by making these anonymous phone calls. The room he imagines is not dissimilar to the one in which he himself was living at the start of the novel, and he therefore projects his own emptiness, and, by extension, his own guilty feelings about the surreptitious calls, outwards down the line. That this is part of the function of his imaginings, which continue 'happily' (p. 195) while the telephone continues to ring, becomes apparent only when the ringing stops and 'a voice he knew' (p. 195) answers 'a little breathlessly' (p. 195). He has reached Anna Hilfe, but does not speak to her, because this is confirmation that she is embroiled in the microfilm plot. The familiar voice is therefore the one which causes him pain because of its very familiarity; her calling to him down the line in these circumstances is evidence of the delusory nature of his feelings of closeness with her. This effect is compounded by the fact that, having

decided to go and confront her rather than contacting the police, he has to spend hours with a directory trying to find the address that matches her number. It is also significant, however, that it is Anna who answers at this juncture rather than her brother Willi because Anna's is one of a number of women's voices that echo throughout the narrative and which serve to create an aura of deathly femininity around the auditory.

Voices from beyond the grave

Rowe hearing Anna's voice through the receiver should therefore be placed in the context of the other phone calls he conducts with her, but it also relates to other disembodied female voices in the novel. These connections are brought to the fore most strongly when Rowe goes, with Willi Hilfe, whom he does not at this point suspect, to the séance at Mrs Bellairs' house, ostensibly to find out more about the mysterious cake. This episode is initially drawn as black comedy; listening to Mrs Bellairs' descriptions of the other participants, Rowe tries 'in vain to see her in a dangerous rôle' (p. 53). These musings are interrupted by a phone call: "Somebody is calling Mr Rowe" (p. 54). The maid's phrasing here underlines the disembodied nature of the telephonic voice; Rowe is confused because nobody knows he has come to Mrs Bellairs' house. The telephone call becomes, in this way, a foreshadowing of the séance, when Rowe is also 'called' in an untimely and unexpected way. Answering the telephone, he is at first unable to 'recognize the voice – a woman's. . . . The voice was blurred, as if a handkerchief had been stretched across the mouthpiece. She couldn't know, he thought, that there were no other woman's voices to confuse with hers' (p. 54). The call is from Anna, who warns Rowe that he must leave the house. But even when Rowe has indicated to her that he has recognized her, she is not referred to by name in the narration: 'The dimmed urgent voice fretted at his nerves . . . the voice was disturbingly convincing. . . . Then the voice sprang at him unexpectedly loud' (p. 55). The message delivered by the voice is a warning to Rowe, but it is stressed here that the voice itself, as much as what it articulates, is unsettling. Rather than establishing an intimate pact between Rowe and Anna, the telephone serves to dislocate the voice from its source and give it a life of its own; it is disturbing, fretting, and springs at him. Connor has argued that 'The voice can only be the sign of the self because it has already come apart from it, and thus may always be able to act as the sign of the self apart from itself.'¹⁹ This suggests a normalization of the disembodied voice, based on the belief that there is a body somewhere for it to have become detached from. For Rowe, however, at this point in the narration, the telephone apparatus serves only to reflect his own anxieties back at him. It is pertinent,

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in this regard, that this voice is marked as female, as this serves only to compound its disturbing power.

Kaja Silverman has suggested that 'whereas the mother's voice initially functions as the acoustic mirror in which the child discovers its identity and voice, it later functions as the acoustic mirror in which the male subject hears all the repudiated elements of his infantile babble.'²⁰ The protective qualities of the 'maternal-voice-as-sonorous-envelope'²¹ are repudiated as the male subject establishes his own subjectivity. Considered from this perspective, the female voice that speaks in the telephone conversation, asserting authority and advising Rowe to leave, is doubly disquieting. It speaks Rowe's own suppressed anxiety, but it also offers a challenge; Rowe can ignore the advice, can stay and commune with the dead, or accept it and risk being immersed in Anna's unnerving, and here, maternal, femininity. He is minded to leave, but Mrs Bellairs and Willi Hilfe conspire to keep him imprisoned (literally, in that Mrs Bellairs locks the door and drops the key down her blouse). This leads to him being 'called' a second time; if Anna's 'call' attempts to draw him away from both the impending 'murder' of Cost (for which he will be framed), it is also, implicitly, a call to leave behind his dead wife. Rowe takes an apparently resolutely materialistic approach to the séance itself, waiting only for 'human movement' (p. 58) rather than a spiritual encounter. He has no trouble in recognizing Mrs Bellairs' voice, albeit Mrs Bellairs 'with a difference ... drugged with an idea' (p. 58), but the voice she apparently summons has a troubling effect on him:

Why all this mummery, he thought, if they are all in it? But perhaps they were not all in it. For anything he knew he was surrounded by friends – but he didn't know which they were.

'Arthur.'

He pulled at the hands holding him. That wasn't Mrs Bellairs' voice.

'Arthur.'

The flat hopeless voice might really have come from beyond the heaviest graveyard slab.

'Arthur, why did you kill. . .'. It wasn't that he recognized the voice: it was no more his wife's than any woman's crying out in infinite hopelessness, pain and reproach: it was that the voice had recognized him.

(p. 58)

Coming after his reflection that he may, after all, be surrounded by friends, the shock of being called is tempered by a momentary hope that perhaps it is one of those 'friends' who is speaking his name. But the impossibility of telling friends from enemies is underlined when he has to admit that,

although the voice sounds deathly, he cannot recognize it – and that it recognizes him is not a sign of friendship but a threat, because it recognizes him as a murderer. This voice, ‘no more his wife’s than any woman’s’, manifesting itself after Anna’s phone call, signals a redoubling of anxieties about the female voice. Taken together with the earlier description of Mrs Bellairs as an androgynous or desexualized being, it serves only to underline the shiftiness of the female voice. Like the voice on the telephone, the voice that calls Rowe at the séance is uncanny because it appears not to emanate from Mrs Bellairs, or indeed to have a bodily origin at all.

Connor has noted that the growth of ‘direct voice’ mediumship – in which spirit voices speak through the medium rather than manifesting themselves through table-turning, rapping or as physical emanations – ‘was undoubtedly encouraged by the development of acoustic technologies’²² including the telephone and gramophone. Not only could technology assist in the production of spirit effects (and Rowe notes that Mrs Bellairs has background accompaniment from a recording of Mendelssohn) but, as I have noted above, technological analogies could be used to explain them: spirits were indeed ‘calling’ from the other side. Discussing the inter-war period, Jenny Hazelgrove has suggested that female mediums ‘benefited from Spiritualism’s democratic, anti-elitist outlook and its privileging of feminine insight – séance conventions fostered the speaking woman, even if they disowned subjective agency’.²³ Whether the privileging of feminine insight can really compensate for the disowning of individual agency is debatable; but it is also notable that, as Hazelgrove points out, attempts to discredit psychic phenomena produced by mediums often involved emphasizing their supposed distortion of the womanly or feminine characteristics. This ambivalent relationship between ‘female intuition’ and femininity is also reflected in the portrayal of Ida Arnold in Greene’s novel *Brighton Rock* (1938). Ida, who takes advice from a ouija board and carries out her own investigation into the death of Fred Hale, is a larger than life character: ‘“A woman. A big one with a laugh.”’²⁴ Both her excessive physical size and her raucous laughter mark Ida out as a threat to Rose and Pinkie; despite Ida’s good intentions, the reader is never allowed to see her actions as completely benign. This allying of mediumship with a distorted version of the feminine also comes to the fore when Rowe returns to Mrs Bellairs’ house with the police. Their search for the missing microfilm involves an assault on the domestic sphere – the smashing of lamps and teacups as well as the churning up of ‘a great many’ (p. 175) pots of cosmetics. The undermining of her power in what ought to be her own sphere of influence is emphasized when, on receiving a telephone call from Dr Forester, Mrs Bellairs has to ask Prentice, the policeman, what she should say. This scene functions as a way of demystifying Mrs Bellairs by exposing her to daylight,²⁵ but paradoxically, displaying, through the police

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invasion of her house, the 'human' side of Mrs Bellairs only serves to reinforce the mystery around the séance. It is precisely the normality of the surroundings which compounds the uncanny nature of what Mrs Bellairs has been practising. The séance introduces ritual practice into the domestic, which can never then reassert a more benign function.

Foreign tongues

The reassurances of the domestic are always elsewhere for Rowe, who is himself homeless for the bulk of the narrative, having been bombed out of his anonymous flat. His attempt to form an alliance with Anna signifies, in part, a desire for the re-establishment of the apparent safety of the domestic, but, just as Anna is a displaced person, so the bulk of Rowe's contact with her occurs at a remove. In this way Rowe is forced to recognize that her loyalties are divided. The ultimate expression of this comes towards the end of the novel when Rowe goes to confront the Hilfes, and the brother and sister shut themselves in the next room: 'There had been low voices in the bedroom: he felt uneasy' (p. 207). Shut out, Rowe is unable to overhear their conversation, and finds this to be as disarming as when he is directly addressed during the séance. Anna and Willi Hilfe are united not only by filial ties but also by their status as foreign nationals. This foreignness, like Anna's femininity, expresses itself through their voices, but predominantly, through Hilfe's. Yet Hilfe's otherness is not conveyed through deficiencies but through a kind of excess. His 'caution and precision' (p. 43) are what mark him out as foreign. His speech has a dated quality which he himself foregrounds, and which is also marked typographically in the novel. 'When he used a colloquialism you could hear the inverted commas drop gently and apologetically around it. . . . "Oh but let's 'hang on' to the stranger," Hilfe said' (pp. 43, 45). These inverted commas are a means of marking for the reader, visually, the difference which Rowe is supposed to perceive aurally, but which Hilfe is himself aware of. Rowe speculates that Hilfe has had a traditional, or indeed old-fashioned, upbringing, but as DeCoste notes, this can serve not merely as another index of Rowe's nostalgia but as a reminder that 'the present war must be seen . . . as a rehearsal of a human perversity of some long historical standing'.²⁶ Hilfe marks himself out as other not only through the self-conscious use of words in inverted commas, but also when, in the disturbance after the discovery of Cost's 'murder' at the séance, he asks Rowe to hit him and make his getaway: 'It's the best alibi you can give me. After all, I'm an enemy alien' (p. 62). This foregrounding of difference, as well as Hilfe's veiled comments about his and Anna's escape from Austria, are intended to persuade Rowe that their difference is not in itself a threat.

Anna's comments, when she and Rowe are trapped in the hotel room together, serve further to disrupt any straightforward identification of allegiances by means of nationality: '[Rowe] said, "Who are they? ... Are they your people or my people?" "They are the same everywhere," she said' (p. 100). Such confusions about identity, motive, and who has power over the life or death of others become increasingly pertinent when Rowe himself, immediately following this incident, loses his memory and spends a spell in Dr Forester's hospital, under the name of Richard Digby. Both Anna and, with less humanitarian intent, Hilfe, have a role in his recovery.

Anna herself reduces the plot in which Rowe has become entangled to a battle between individuals: 'I don't care a damn about England. I want you to be happy, that's all' (p. 201). She nevertheless concurs with Rowe's desire to stop Hilfe taking the crucial microfilm out of the country: '"We've got to stop him," he said. The "we" like the French *tu* spoken for the first time conveyed everything' (p. 201). Notably, though, the 'we' used by Rowe is a way of bringing Anna in on his side, co-opting her to his cause, even if it does also imply that he and she, as opposed to she and her brother, are now a dyad. In this respect, it is crucially different to 'tu', which, while signalling intimacy, would nevertheless have granted her a continued singular subjectivity. This is not the only moment during this scene when language, and specifically, the foreignness of language, is brought to the reader's notice. When Rowe goes to confront him, Willi Hilfe is lying asleep:

The face seemed to Rowe very beautiful, more beautiful than his sister's, which could be marred by grief or pity. ... He [Hilfe] had been reading when he fell asleep; a book lay on the bed and one hand still held the pages open. It was like the tomb of a young student; bending down you could read on the marble page the epitaph chosen for him, a verse:

*'Denn Orpheus ists. Seine Metamorphose
in dem und dem. Wir sollens uns nicht mühn*

*um andere Namen. Ein für alle Male
ists Orpheus, wenn es singt ...'*

The knuckles hid the rest.

It was as if he were the only violence in the world and when he slept there was peace everywhere.

(p. 203)

The intrusion of the German text, an extract from the fifth of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which Greene leaves untranslated, is a visible

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reminder of Hilfe's otherness; this is a fragment of pre-war European culture.²⁷ The passage including the quotation is interesting, not only because the logic of the narrative voice here suggests that it is Rowe himself who is reading (and remembering, or recognizing) the extract, not something one would necessarily expect from a man whose knowledge of literature has hitherto stretched only as far as Dickens, Charlotte Yonge and William Le Queux. The image of Willi Hilfe as a figure on a tomb together with the embedded reference to Rilke and, by extension, the Orpheus myth, are occluded but nevertheless suggestive references to the themes of death, voice and the uncanny that I have been pursuing.²⁸

The burden of the sonnet pulls against the conceit of it being inscribed on a tomb: it insists that no memorial should be raised to Orpheus, for his voice, and specifically his song, will persist. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus' song wins him the pity of the gods in the underworld, enabling him to attempt to lead Eurydice away. After this fails, when he looks back to see if she is following him, he laments her death by singing of other thwarted love affairs, and turns away from involvement with women. Finally, he is torn to pieces by the jealous Ciconian women: 'the waters of the Hebrus received his head and lyre. Wonderful to relate, as they floated down in midstream, the lyre uttered a plaintive melody and the lifeless tongue made a piteous murmur.'²⁹ While Hilfe lies silent and sleeping, Rowe models him as an object of desire capable of displacing his sister, whose beauty is marred by the 'grief and pity' that her involvement with Rowe has provoked. The notion of sleep as a semblance of death (and vice versa) is also invoked here, in a gesture towards the continuities between death and life that emerge in the Orphic myth and concern Rilke. Yet Hilfe's beauty masks violence, and the notion that his sleep brings peace to the world is a further incitement to Rowe to end Hilfe's life, as though killing Hilfe will put a stop to violence at large. This idea, however, requires a forgetting of the uncanny persistence of Orpheus' voice after death.³⁰

Ironically, given Rowe's romanticized vision of him, Hilfe conceals a gun beneath his book of poetry. He also possesses knowledge about Rowe's past which serves to taint Rowe's future, and specifically his future with Anna. When Rowe and Hilfe have their final showdown, staged, bathetically, in the gentlemen's lavatories at Paddington, Hilfe takes the opportunity to force remembrance on Rowe, who, since his spell of amnesia, has not recalled the death of his wife. Having risen up from his 'tomb', Hilfe thus acts as a negative Orpheus, punishing Rowe for not allowing him to end his own life by reminding him of his tragic marriage. The pair are trapped by an air raid with another man who is oblivious to their revelations, having 'ears for nothing but the heavy uneven stroke of the bomber overhead' (p. 217). As Hilfe's words cause Rowe to recall past events hitherto inaccessible to him, the visual images of his former life that Rowe

conjures up displace and defamiliarize the present situation: ““Go along,” a voice said, “to Anna now,” and he looked across a dimmed blue interior to a man who stood by the wash-basins and laughed at him’ (p. 217). Hilfe’s voice, repeatedly asking Rowe what he is going to do, and the voice of the anonymous stranger, become intertwined: ““Anna ...” the voice began again, and another voice said with a kind of distant infinite regret at the edge of consciousness, “And I might have caught the 6.15”’ (p. 218). This juxtaposition may be read as an attempt to foreground the grimly comic aspects of the scenario, Rowe’s whole, shameful past returning to him in a mundane situation, but it is also a reminder that the war will not end with Hilfe’s death, that it is not simply a battle between two individuals. Rowe’s decision to give Hilfe the gun, and allow him to kill himself, is partly an echo of the ‘mercy killing’ of Rowe’s wife, but is also an attempt at self-preservation on Rowe’s part: he believes, wrongly, that by killing Hilfe he can put to rest the secrets from the past that Hilfe knows.

Conclusion

Brian Diemert has suggested that Hilfe’s repetition of the phrase, ‘Don’t tell me the past, tell me the future’ during this climactic scene acts as a means of signalling ‘the end of the thriller plot’³¹ which began when Rowe accidentally uttered the same phrase to Mrs Bellairs. ‘It is as if the text Rowe speaks holds within it a potential narrative that is made manifest by an error in reading and then is withdrawn by [Hilfe’s] repetition of the original command.’³² Rowe does not realize, before he speaks to Mrs Bellairs, the power his words will have; it falls to Hilfe, who is in on the plot, to mark its ending. This apparent closure, however, is belied by the images and evocations of the continuity of life, and specifically of speech after the end, that proliferate throughout the novel. We are left with Anna and Rowe’s relationship, structured around a central silence, founded around his denial that Hilfe revealed anything before his death. Anna will not tell Rowe she knows about his past, he will not tell her he knows she knows. This is a vision of a future domesticity with something *unheimlich* – a ghost from the past – at its core.

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Notes

- 1 Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 136.
- 2 Ibid.

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- 3 Ibid., p. 46.
- 4 Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 3.
- 5 Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 390.
- 6 Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939–1945* (Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), p. 71. See also Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 7 See Lyndsey Stonebridge, 'Bombs and roses: the writing of anxiety in Henry Green's *Caught*', in Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (eds) *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 46–69 for a reading of Green's novel in terms of historical and sexual trauma in wartime.
- 8 Steven Connor, 'The modern auditory I', in Roy Porter (ed.) *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 210.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 210–11.
- 10 Vera Brittain, *England's Hour* (London: Macmillan, 1941), p. 23.
- 11 Vera Brittain, *Wartime Chronicle: Diary 1939–1945* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1989), pp. 90–1.
- 12 George Orwell, 'London letter to the *Partisan Review* March 1941', in Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume II: My Country Right or Left* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 55.
- 13 Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973 [1943]), p. 11. All other references to this text are included parenthetically.
- 14 Damon Marcel DeCoste, 'Modernism's shell-shocked history: amnesia, repetition and the War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45(4) (1999), p. 439.
- 15 The imprisonment of Helen Duncan in 1944 was a result both of security concerns and a desire to expose fraudulent mediums. See Malcolm Gaskill, *Hellish Nell: Last of Britain's Witches* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001).
- 16 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 380.
- 17 Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology – Schizophrenia – Electric Speech* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press), p. 8.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Steven Connor, 'The ethics of the voice', in Dominic Rainsford and Tim Woods (eds) *Critical Ethics: Text, Theory and Responsibility* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 233.
- 20 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 81.
- 21 Ibid., p. 73.
- 22 Connor, *Dumbstruck*, p. 366.
- 23 Jenny Hazelgrove, *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 235.
- 24 Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), p. 90.
- 25 Hazelgrove also notes that mediums were often described using vampiric imagery.
- 26 DeCoste, 'Modernism's shell-shocked history', p. 435.
- 27 J.B. Leishman's 1936 translation renders the lines:
 For this is Orpheus. His metamorphosis
 into so many such. We should not take
 thought about other names. Now and forever
 it's Orpheus, when there is song.

- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus: Written as a Monument for Wera Ouckama Knoop*, trans. J.B. Leishman (London: Hogarth Press, 1936).
- 28 As Helen Sword has noted, Rilke was one of a number of modernist writers interested in the possibilities of spiritualism; in 1912 he made contact with ‘the spirit of someone identified only as *die Unbekannte*, “the unknown woman,” who successfully convinced him to undertake a long-contemplated journey to Spain’. *Ghostwriting Modernism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 86. Nora Wydenbruck, Rilke’s friend, correspondent and biographer, who had a long-standing interest in the paranormal, adds the details that the “unknown lady” stated that she had been murdered long ago’ and that after the séance, Rilke had dreams which supplemented what the lady had told him. Nora Wydenbruck, *Rilke: Man and Poet: A Biographical Study* (London: John Lehmann, 1949), p. 228. Rilke did not make contact through a ‘direct voice’ medium, but used a *planchette*, an aid to automatic writing. As a schoolboy, Greene had psychoanalysis under Kenneth Richmond, who was also a spiritualist, and whose wife Zoe described Greene as ‘a natural medium’. Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Volume I 1904–1939* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1989), p. 105. In his autobiography *A Sort of Life* (1971), Greene records dreaming of a shipping disaster on the night before the sinking of the Titanic; and both his short story ‘Proof Positive’ (1930) and his novel *Brighton Rock* (1938) deal, in different ways, with spiritualist phenomena, but he does not appear to have ever attended a séance.
- 29 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 247.
- 30 The idea of the voice persisting after death is also important in *Brighton Rock*. Pinkie records a message for Rose on a gramophone record; she believes this is a declaration of love, but the reader knows otherwise. Rose has no means of playing the record and is left in ignorance at the end of the novel.
- 31 Brian Diemert, *Graham Greene’s Thrillers and the 1930s* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), p. 163.
- 32 *Ibid.*