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Civil Noise and its Discontents

Recent scholarship in eighteenth-century British history has done much to complicate the apparently stark opposition between polite and impolite cultures. Politeness emerges from these accounts as a much roomier, cross-class category capable of embracing, in Paul Langford's words, 'a great variety of values, attitudes and ideas', including behaviour that would appear to be its opposite.¹ It is from within these efforts to challenge self-evidently antithetical terms that this chapter finds its subject: civil noise; noise acknowledged as something in excess of articulate, intended or desired sound, yet not presumptively excluded on those grounds. For us, civil noise is likely encountered in provisions protecting the sonically besieged, as in civil noise abatement or civil noise ordinances. Such instruments assume that civility perishes under noise and that legal curtailment is restorative. To some extent, the emergence of the discourse of politeness initiated, or at least consolidated, this link between noise and incivility, leading to numerous attempts to regulate the acoustic environment of urban life.² Less noticed in both studies of sound and civility, however, is that for extended periods in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, noise was also heard from within the soundscape of English politeness, not countering it.

¹ Paul Langford, "The Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002): 326. See also, for example, Jenny Davidson, *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness: Manners and Morals from Locke to Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Jon Mee, *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise and Stench in England, 1600-1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 121-127.

My intention in this essay is not to broadly survey the shifting state of English manners, but rather to narrowly examine an early and ultimately protracted example of the decoupling of noise from civility among visitors to so called 'shew-houses'. I will make three intertwining claims. First, that the great house is one of the locations where the civil noise of a new class of visitors is felt to disrupt the traditional sonic order. Second, that early museums addressed the problem of civil noise as part of a set of questions around the function and purpose of public institutions. Third, that the separation of civility from noise shaped the architecture of nineteenth-century middle-class domesticity. What follows is a series of fictional and non-fictional encounters with the expression of noisy civility and the conditions under which it might be disciplined.

What did civil noise sound like? A remnant echo of sorts may be heard in James Beresford's compendious work, *The Miseries of Human Life* (1806). *The Miseries* proceeds as a series of alternating monologues from Timothy Testy, a coarse, city-dwelling misanthropist, and Sir Samuel Sensitive, country gentleman, all-suffering devotee of sensibility and fleeting domestic comfort's mourner-in-chief. While each attempt to convince the other that he alone has suffered the most, cumulatively they present over 300 'groans' grouped by their originating sources in the miseries of dining, reading, writing, travel, fashion, the country, the town and the home.

Much of what is negatively encountered in *The Miseries* would be all too familiar to casual readers of Smollett, Sterne or Fielding: unstoppable bores, incontinent servants, poisonous cooks, cheating tailors and the manufacturers of defective flues. Added to these durable sources of unhappiness are those that originate from within Testy and Sensitive themselves: gout, embarrassing turns

of forgetfulness and a nearly inexhaustible supply of evening-ruining *faux pas*. The satire of *The Miseries* casts a wide net, drawing in a host of middling English agonies measured along the length of their put-upon bodies: ‘What, my poor Sir’, asks Sensitive, ‘are the senses but five yawning inlets to hourly and momentary molestations?’³ Not surprisingly, many of these insults prove sonic in origin; with both Sensitive and Testy finding occasion to complain of strident bells, deafening conversational settings, incursive street noise and tuneless footmen given to song. Some disturbances are heard to cluster around sociable sites like the coffee house, theatre or concert hall where noise specifically interferes with the capacity to direct attention: ‘At a concert—as you are preparing to listen to one of Bartleman’s best songs, being suddenly environed by a crew of savages, whose laughter and gabble are all that you are allowed to hear’.⁴

When he calls out a portion of the concert audience as savages, Sensitive applies a term more at home in the denigration of plebeian cultures. Certainly, this is how he uses it in the ‘Miseries of London’, when he complains of the brute, wall-penetrating force of ‘that savage jargon of yells, brays, and screams’ coming from ‘dustmen, beggars, muffin-mongers, knife grinder, and news carriers’.⁵ Similarly, Testy uses it when he describes the ‘savage jollity’ of popular amusements such as ‘bull-baiting, a boxing match, an execution, &c &c’.⁶ Sensitive may wish to shame the noisy concertgoers surrounding him, but by some accounts, these savages were not a distinct cohort, but rather the entire

³ James Beresford, *The Miseries of Human Life* (London: Printed for W. Miller by W. Bulmar, 1806): 13.

⁴ Beresford, *The Miseries*, 85.

⁵ Beresford, *The Miseries*, 63.

⁶ Beresford, *The Miseries*, 37.

audience. Horace Walpole makes an earlier, related observation about the London opera audience in a letter to Sir Horace Mann in which he complained of ‘those who don’t love music, love noise and party, and will any night give half-a-guinea for the liberty of hissing’.⁷ Walpole’s point is that music is incidental to the more pressing demands of things like faction (party). It is this audience engaged with the supposedly wrong object that emerges in Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992). Goehr argues that English and European concertgoers attended performances that were effectively extra-musical – that is, the music served as ‘background affairs ... to serious or frivolous activities’ pursued across box, pit and gallery.⁸ William Weber takes issue with Goehr’s characterisation because she judges the eighteenth-century audience – and finds them wanting – by post-Romantic standards of serious, silent and sustained attention across the musical work. He suggests instead that opera audience behaviours and listening practices are better understood within a context of what he terms the ‘sociable aesthetic’.⁹ Weber concedes that audiences both chatted loudly and moved about, but this was mostly in gaps opened between those parts of the performance that were most highly valued, such as the aria. From a post-Romantic vantage point that ‘distrusts any fusion between music and mundane social activities’, this kind of disorderly behaviour is unconscionable.¹⁰ But, for Weber, Goehr’s judgment fails to properly

⁷ Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1842): 302.

⁸ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992): 192.

⁹ William Weber, “Did People Listen in the 18th Century?” *Early Music* 25, no. 4 (1997): 681.

¹⁰ Weber, “Did People Listen,” 681.

acknowledge the complex demands placed on the audience to actively participate in the performance as social event.¹¹ Although he does not refer to *The Miseries* directly, Weber would likely view Sensitive's complaint against the savages as evidence of the existence of a listening principle within the totality of the sociable aesthetic itself, but it might be better understood as a dissenting argument urging the suspension of otherwise permissible Georgian noise under conditions of cultural appreciation.

In the eighth groan, Sensitive again bridles in the midst of an unruly audience, this time at the restrictions their unregulated behaviour place on the free expression of his emotions:

Your feelings put to the rack throughout the most moving scenes of a deep tragedy, by a riotous rascal in the upper gallery, who will not, for a moment, suffer his neighbours to cry in peace—while you are perpetually tantalized with neglected proposals from the tender-hearted part of the audience, “throw him over.”¹²

Sensitive's complaint acoustically distinguishes three rival domains of speech filling the space from stage to upper gallery: dramatic performance, disruptive mockery above and countering hostility below. These combine to form the unruly (but otherwise unremarkably civil) noisescap of the theatre from which Sensitive seeks respite or, rather, a bubble of amenable silence in which to weep.

His final groan on this subject – and after three related complaints of this kind, we may call it a subject – moves beyond the performance halls and theatres to a 'shew-house':

¹¹ Weber, “Did People Listen,” 681.

¹² Beresford, *The Miseries*, 86.

In seeing what is called “a Shew-house,” —keeping pace, whether you will or not, through all the rooms, with another party, (Hottentots,) —by which means, besides having your privacy destroyed, you cannot hear (or cannot understand), what is said by one guide, for the continual counter-gabble of the other.¹³

The savages plaguing performance hall and theatre make a hyperbolic return in a racially specific form to renew their noisier assault on whatever it is that Sensitive aspires to learn about ‘all the rooms’. His peculiar response to their apparent intrusion – that his privacy has been destroyed – implies an alternative, slightly ascetic model of cultural experience in which the sonically insulated auditor needs to hang on the guide’s every expert word (perhaps anticipating the advent of the exhibition audioguide). Although Sensitive’s private encounter was clearly spoiled, his description of the ‘Hottentot’s’ interfering noise as ‘counter-gabble’ complicates matters somewhat. The objectionable counter-gabble can find an opposing force nowhere else except in the house guide’s gabble, fixing the hapless Sensitive between competing forms of mutually worthless speech. Once again, the totality of sociable and civil noise blocks Sensitive’s aesthetic pleasure, self-expression and desire for self-improvement.

Placing the problem of noisy fellow visitors to one side for a moment, the unworthiness of the guide’s speech was a commonly remarked upon feature of the great house visit. On his arrival at Belvoir Castle on 7 June 1789, John Byng sought admission from a housekeeper whose ‘very drunken, dawdling appearance’ prefigured her ‘numberless’ mistakes including identifying a

¹³ Beresford, *The Miseries*, 109.

painting of the Duke of Buckingham as ‘that villain Felton; finely confusing the Murder’d with the Murderer!’¹⁴ The complaints of visitors to shew-houses ranged from the guide’s insolence and ignorance¹⁵ to their use of unintelligible jargon – a telling grievance from newer visitors alienated by tours shaped by antiquarian preoccupations.¹⁶ Such experiential faultiness divided the newer, pleasure-seeking visitors from the expectations of more scholarly types. One ‘disgusted connoisseur’ deplored the way visiting parties were ‘driven’ through the apartments of Hampton Court:

by the deputy-housekeeper or one of her housemaids, who pointed out the pictures with a long stick, calling out, in a loud voice, at the same time, the names of the subjects and their painters to the awe stricken company—a procedure that allowed of little opportunity for studying or enjoying them.¹⁷

In *The British Tourists* (1800), William Mavor’s harrumphing dissatisfaction with his tour extended beyond the housekeeper to a host of reputation-damaging staff:

We have more than once had occasion to remark, that the impression visitors receive from the view of a place, is as frequently conveyed by the mode in which it is shewn, as by its native beauties or defects. A

¹⁴ C. Bruyn Andrews, editor, *The Torrington Diaries Containing the Tours Through England and Wales of the Hon. John Byng* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938): 133–4.

¹⁵ Adrian Tinniswood, *The Polite Tourist: Four Centuries of Country House Visiting*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989): 97; Ian Ousby, *The Englishman’s England: Taste, Travel and The Rise of Tourism* (London, Pimlico, 2002): 50, 63.

¹⁶ Ernest Law, *The History of Hampton Court Palace*, vol. 3 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1891): 327.

¹⁷ Law, *History of Hampton Court*, 343.

gentleman meets with a surly porter, an avaricious housekeeper, or a begging, insolent gardener; he is at once disgusted; and retorts, very unjustly, the faults of the servant on the owner, or his seat.¹⁸

Cumulatively, these examples suggest a problem with the house tour where narrative expertise was delegated to those with an unwarranted claim to possess it. It is also the case that there were servants who admirably discharged their responsibility as guides. Visitors to Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, for example, praised Mrs Garnett's capacity for 'uncommon politeness and attention'.¹⁹ Boswell, who visited the house with Johnson in 1777, paid equal tribute to her seemliness and sonic authority. She was 'a well-drest elderly housekeeper, a most distinct articulator'.²⁰

But before Boswell and Johnson could appreciate Mrs Garnett's fabled diction they, like most visitors to great houses, were obliged to apply for access in writing or, gallingly, present themselves at the gate for an impromptu social assessment based on the quality of their dress, number of servants and mode of transport. With the rise of polite tourism towards the end of the eighteenth century, these methods gave way to new and more restrictive controls such as advance ticketing, sometimes with a list of house rules attached.²¹ Walpole, who had no qualms describing visitors to Strawberry Hill as a 'plague', restricted

¹⁸ William Fordyce Mavor, *The British Tourists; Or, Traveller's Pocket Companion*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (London: E. Newbery, 1809): 235.

¹⁹ Quoted in Tinniswood, *Polite Tourist*, 104.

²⁰ George Birkbeck Hill, editor, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934): 161.

²¹ Tinniswood, *Polite Tourist*, 93. The various conditions contributing to the rise of polite tourism are strictly beyond the narrower scope of this chapter. Both Tinniswood and Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) offer detailed, if divergent, accounts.

access to the house to one party of four per day, with the additional proviso that children not be admitted.²² Besides quashing the – admittedly surprising – prospect of Strawberry Hill’s family-friendliness, the ruling against children preemptively installs prohibited visitor behaviours in their unruly, sensation-seeking bodies. What these behaviours might have been is vividly demonstrated in Walpole’s correspondence. In a 1793 letter to Mary Berry, he writes that ‘Two companies had been to see my house last week, and one of the parties, as vulgar people always see with the ends of their fingers, had broken off the end of my invaluable eagle’s bill, and to conceal their mischief, had pocketed the piece’.²³ Walpole noted other, related incidents experienced by those who, like him, understood ‘what a grievance it is to have a house worth being seen’.²⁴ In a letter to the antiquarian William Cole, Walpole recalls a visit to Cannons, James Brydges’s seat near Middlesex, where he saw a ‘beautiful table of Oriental alabaster that had been split in two by a buck in boots jumping up backwards to sit upon it’.²⁵ In a related vein, he notes that Phillip Southcote’s famed garden at Wooburn Farm is closed because ‘the savages who came as connoisseurs scribbled a thousand brutalities, in the buildings, upon his religion’.²⁶

Such sensory overreach is understood in terms of rough or sectarian behaviour. Whatever panicky remorse may have consumed the visitor who snapped the invaluable eagle’s bill is not a topic Walpole explores. That is, he

²² Stephen Clarke, “‘Lord God! Jesus! What a House!’: Describing and Visiting Strawberry Hill,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 3 (2009): 365.

²³ Quoted in Clarke, “‘Lord God! Jesus! What a House!’” 365.

²⁴ Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford*, vol. 6 (London: Richard Bentley, 1840): 131.

²⁵ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 131.

²⁶ Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, 131.

only records the visit's brutal aftermath as symptoms of character, his letters never registering, much less imagining, what might motivate the visitor's touch or how they might choose to explain their actions. Fortunately, some traces of what we might think of as the visitor's perspective are recounted in a skirmish between the underkeeper (curator) of the Oxford Ashmolean and a very hands-on museum-goer:

She desired me to take the Glass from off several of the Drawers, which I was somewhat unwilling to do, lest anything be lost by that means; which she perceiving she told me that I was not quite so civil as might be; that the last time she had seen the Museum . . . she had handled and examin'd the Curiosities in the Cabinet as long as she pleas'd.²⁷

Of course, the museum – an institution I will turn to shortly – is not identical to the great house, but, as this example suggests, they are both burdened by the visitor's apparent incapacity to keep their hands off the displayed objects – a claim countered in the Ashmolean visitor's rejection of the museum's newly restrictive, object-hoarding order. Her view that the underkeeper's refusal amounts to incivility challenges his effort to cast her demands in a boorish and uncivil light. In other words, both visitor and curator make appeal to civility by way of reining in the other, suggesting a category still surprisingly roomy enough to warrant action on opposing sides of a dispute. In this instance, as Constance Classen notes, the visitor's civil curiosity-rights prevailed and the curator handed over some of the requested items, 'that she might inspect them more narrowly'.²⁸

²⁷ Quoted in Constance Classen, "Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007): 898

²⁸ Quoted in Classen, "Museum Manners," 898.

For my purposes, the institutional uncertainty around such indelicacies of touch stand in for the cognate problem of barely permissible civil noise as a phenomenon similarly on the verge of disciplinary restriction.²⁹

To properly measure the volume of sonic disturbance in the great house, we need to take a step back, as it were, to think in terms of the larger acoustic environment in which civil noise propagated in locations like the long gallery. Visitors to great houses with a keen eye for paintings would have looked forward to touring the long or state gallery. Coming into vogue in the second half of the sixteenth century, the gallery was, in the words of biographer Roger North, a ‘room for no other use but pastime and health, so far as the gentle moving usuall within the walls of an house may concerne it’.³⁰ A space for mobile recreation, it could either be ‘taken into the parade of the house’ – that is, as quasi-public – or ‘kept for the private diversion of the master’.³¹ In either case, it warranted decoration mostly in the form of paintings, typically portraits.³² When Celia Fiennes visited Euston Hall in the late seventeenth century, she was struck by the portraits of the ‘Royal Family from K Henry the 7th by the Scottish race his eldest daughter down to the present King William and his Queen Mary’. These were arranged along one side of the long gallery. Along the other were to be found ‘foreign princes from the Emperor of Morocoe the Northern and Southern Princes and the Emperour of Germany’.³³ A gallery such as Grafton’s could signal

²⁹ In “Museum Manners: The Sensory life of the Early Museum,” Classen demonstrates how the problem of visitors touching exhibits is slowly disciplined through converting the museum into a largely visual experience.

³⁰ Quoted in Rosalys Coope, “The ‘Long Gallery’: Its Origins, Development, Use and Decoration,” *Architectural History*, 29 (1986): 59

³¹ Quoted in Coope, “The ‘Long Gallery’”: 59

³² Coope, “The ‘Long Gallery’”: 61

³³ Quoted in Coope, “The ‘Long Gallery’”: 62

loyalty to the crown, while also registering more cosmopolitan interests in royal courts abroad. Polite visitors may or may not have understood, or even wished to engage with, the various claims such an arrangement might communicate.³⁴ In 1767, Weeden Butler, cleric and editor, dramatised a day at the British Museum accompanied by his friend's daughters. The resulting manuscript features young women crying out, 'very pretty! Extremely fine! Excessively curious! Wonderfully disposed! Amazingly elegant! Strikingly beautiful, indeed!'³⁵ Although Butler's characters are not visiting a great house, their response to the paintings finds its comic premise in the – slightly weary – recognition of the polite visitor's formalised response.³⁶ Clearly, not all paintings were viewed this way and polite tourism doubtless encompassed many different intensities of looking, including something approaching antiquarian absorption. Butler's account is useful, though, to the extent that it models liberality – the visitor's implied eye dictating progress through the gallery – mixed with something else: formalised speech as sound. The young women's exuberant praise affirms the value of the esteemed object, but it also marks the terminal point of their attention while declaring a readiness to move along towards whatever comes next. Helen Rees Leahy rightly describes the long gallery as a location where 'walking and looking were

³⁴ See also Lawrence Stone, "The Public and Private in Stately Homes of England, 1500–1990," *Social Research* 58, no. 1 (1991), who also considers the communicative aspect of the great house as a kind of speech act, 'a stunning public statement of power, wealth, and status', 229.

³⁵ Quoted in Anne Goldgar, "The British Museum and the Virtual Representation of Culture in the Eighteenth Century," *Albion* 32, no. 2 (2000): 211.

³⁶ As Adrian Tinniswood describes – or rather, reconstructs – the scene of polite tourism, visitors were content to 'note the picture which attracted him or her, offering little in the way of critical comment beyond the occasional "fine" or "very striking"', 110.

explicitly conjoined', but sound is also a part of this assemblage.³⁷ The sounds associated with movement through the hall would alternate between footsteps, the guide's explanatory speech and the polite tourist's conventionalised appreciation: striking, fine, wonderful. This, admittedly ideal, transaction cleaves closest to the monovocality that Samuel Sensitive expects and grieves in its absence.

Monovocality, it would appear, is particularly well suited to the distinctive and socially aggrandising acoustics of the hall; a large, relatively unimpeded volume with a frequently noted tendency to echo – unsurprising given the larger purpose of the house to amplify name and reputation. Consider this anonymous account of a visit to Hampton Court:

These princely halls ... have come to be almost as silent as their dead master's tomb. They have nothing to echo back but the hurried footstep of a single domestic, who passes through them daily, to wipe away the dust of their untrodden floors, only it may collect there again; or the unintelligible jargon of a superannuated dependant, as he describes to a few straggling visitors (without looking at them either) the objects of art that have been deposited in them, like treasure in a tomb.³⁸

For Ernest Law, author of a late-Victorian multi-volume history of Hampton Court, the quote furnished evidence of the palace's general decline under George IV. That is, the hall's acoustic characteristics were recruited for the grimmer purpose of ironic reflection; the echoes amplify the *wrong* source. The

³⁷ Helen Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2012): 76.

³⁸ Law, *History of Hampton Court Palace*, 326–7.

housekeeper and yet another gabbling dependant occupy acoustic space we are to understand as properly reserved for their master's voice.

The hall's tendency to amplify or modify the circuit of the voice proved an enduring object of interest for nineteenth-century acousticians thinking about the effective propagation of sound in public buildings. It is here where some of the sonic deficits associated with the hall are noted in a technical light. T. Roger Smith's *A Rudimentary Treatise on The Acoustics of Public Buildings* (1861) ruefully acknowledged the difficulty of describing the effect of complex space on sound:

the truth is, that the moment a sound becomes surrounded by the multiplied conditions that affect it in a building—the disturbance, the resonance, or the echo that it may meet with—it is exposed to so many conflicting influences that it becomes very difficult for the man of science to do more than state very generally what results the conditions under which it is placed may be reasonably expected to induce.³⁹

Among those conditions, Smith warns against undamped spaciousness creating an 'injurious excess of sound'.⁴⁰ Apartments of 'bad proportion ... such as are disproportionately lofty, and have plain unbroken walls, seem very subject to reverberation'.⁴¹ Such spaces are 'liable to be unduly sonorous'.⁴²

³⁹ Thomas Roger Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise on the Acoustics of Public Buildings* (London: John Weale, 1861): 37–8.

⁴⁰ Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 39.

⁴¹ Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 50.

⁴² Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 51.

Although Smith is silent on the social implications of lofty disproportion, he does identify some of the sources of acoustic indistinction in the grander features that both dignify public building and incidentally trap volumes of noisy air. He lays out the problem by quoting a translated passage from Theodore Lachez's *Optique et Acoustique* (1848):

The coffers ... with which ceilings are decorated, vaults, ornamental niches, the reveal of doors, and other similar recesses, all afford little cubes of air which vibrate each one with its own appropriate vibrations, like a kind of organ-pipe, under the excitement of the undulations in the building, and add to the fatiguing resonance of halls by augmenting the sum of confused noises.⁴³

Although the introduction of classical, ecclesiastical and aristocratic design elements furnished some grandeur, they potentially muddled the prospect of clear communication. The solutions Smith recommends are straightforward. At Exeter Hall, for example, he briskly notes that a plain ceiling replaced a coffered one 'with success'.⁴⁴ Again, there is no suggestion that better results stem from simpler, more demotic form, only that 'bad proportion', 'ill disposed forms' and 'unshapeliness' are 'possibly the cause of failures which cannot be attributed to any influence that has yet been described'.⁴⁵ Buildings that make too much clamour out of speech or song may find their remedy in the technical disciplining of their form by taking something away like prestige coffering. Cumulatively, we see two sides of a combined effort to make civil buildings out of noisy ones. Halls

⁴³ Quoted in Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 52.

⁴⁴ Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 52.

⁴⁵ Smith, *A Rudimentary Treatise*, 58–9.

limited their acoustically reflective surfaces, much as the great houses constrained the acoustic conduct of their visitors. The early museums made a related contribution to this project by identifying specific sonic behaviours as uncivil.

As Helen Rees Leahy illustrates in *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing* the question of who should (and should not) be admitted to locations such as the British Museum and The Royal Academy was a matter of debate throughout the reign of George III.⁴⁶ Curators principally occupied with protecting their collections worried about visitors motivated by things other than a desire to see art, such as keeping warm and dry, for example, while those critics and politicians committed to a more inclusive cultural sphere looked to the museum as a space of aesthetic education.⁴⁷ Both of these camps, however, scrutinised spectators for evidence of appropriate behaviour – a process that contributed to the visualisation and codification of incivility.

Even before an institution like the British Museum was opened to the public, a committee was established to consider rules governing the visit. The resulting draft memorandum identified ‘persons of mean and low Degree’ for exclusion, but it also forbade ‘Rude or ill Behaviour’; a vaporous category permitting discipline over a much broader range of conduct.⁴⁸

Among those feeling the practical force of this new regime was the historian of Birmingham, William Hutton, who visited the Museum on 7

⁴⁶ Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 28.

⁴⁷ Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 26.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 26.

December 1784. He had applied for an advance ticket – a technique borrowed from the great houses – and on entry joined a group of ten on a guided tour:

We began to move pretty fast, when I asked with some surprise, whether there were none to inform us what the curiosities were as we went on? A tall genteel young man in person, who seemed to be our conductor, replied with some warmth, 'What? Would you have me tell you every thing in the Museum? How is it possible? Besides, are not the names written upon many of them?' I was too much humbled by this reply to utter another word. The company seemed influenced: they made haste and were silent. No voice was heard but in whispers ...

When our leader opens the door of another apartment, the silent language of that action is, *come along*.⁴⁹

Intensely disappointed with the experience of the Museum, Hutton likened himself to Tantalus: 'in the midst of a rich entertainment, consisting of ten thousand rarities, but ... I could not taste one'.⁵⁰ Far from learning anything useful about the collection, Hutton found himself the object of instruction, in compliance, speed and, above all, the silence and near-silence of civil comportment. Hutton's stifled experience is contradicted in accounts from more permissive institutions like Somerset House, The Academy of Art or even The British Museum under later, more liberal administrations. Henry Thomas Alken's illustrated novel *Real Life in London. Or, The Rambles and Adventures of Bob Tallyho, Esq. And His Cousin, The Hon Tom Dashall, Through The Metropolis*

⁴⁹ William Hutton, *A Journey from Birmingham to London* (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1785): 189–91.

⁵⁰ Hutton, *A Journey*, 191–2.

(1821) includes a section devoted to a visit to The British Museum that treats it much like any other site of raucous Georgian sociability; an occasion for gossip, flirtation and satirical reflection:

the reconnoitering eye of Dashall observed a trio, from whence he anticipated considerable amusement. It was a family triumvirate, formed of an old Bachelor, whose cent per cent ideas predominated over every other, wheresoever situated or howsoever employed; his maiden Sister, prim, starch and antiquated; and their hopeful Nephew, a complete coxcomb, that is, in full possession of the requisite concomitants—ignorance and impudence, and arrayed in the first style of the most exquisite dandyism.⁵¹

Each of these characters speaks directly to the subject of their interests. For the sister, this was the hope of seeing, as she expressed it, the 'He-gipsyan munhuments, kivered with kerry-glee-fix'.⁵² Her brother's concern was to ascertain 'whether, independent of outlandish baubles, gimcracks and gewgaws, there was anything of substantiality with which to enhance the per contra side in the Account Current between the British Museum and the Public!'⁵³ Nephew Jasper – the dandy – explains the surprisingly Celtic origins of an exhibited sarcophagus, or 'Sark o' Fegus', a winding sheet that borrowed its name from chemises worn by 'the daughters of O'Fegus, a highland chieftain'.

⁵¹ Quoted in Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 34.

⁵² Quoted in Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 34.

⁵³ Quoted in Leahy, *Museum Bodies*, 34.

It is the character's outlandish speech – founded in malapropism and fixation – that comically warrants, and diverts, Dashall and Tom's attention. The accompanying illustration (fig. 1) concedes the institution as provisional stage for the expression of eccentric utterance, pushing or displacing the vaunted objects of the museum to the background and then summarily cutting off their full length. Grouped downstage, the speakers theatrically project ludicrous observations – there is no space or prospect for Samuel Sensitive-like withdrawal into a private exchange with a guide or even quieter appreciation. The comic charge here, such as it is, relies on the triumvirate's resounding cluelessness; they do not or cannot grasp the social risk that follows their exposure to satirical ridicule. Alken does not elaborate or frame the inevitable consequences as a sort of moral: the cancelled engagement, the cold shoulder at the club, the vicar's slight. There are no lessons to be taught along those lines as this is not that kind of book, but the message is clear enough: the noisy, confident, civility of the museum triumvirate, at least in this location, is terminally marked.

Collectively, the efforts of architects, masters, administrators, acousticians and satirists begin to foreclose on the locations in which noisy civility may be expressed. In order to trace one final and very effective example of silencing we must turn, briefly and by way of conclusion, to the domestic fortunes of the corridor.

I will not rehearse the early modern European origins of the corridor here in favour of simply observing the fact of its eventual triumph in nineteenth-century Britain. The English architectural historian Robin Evans bundles the corridor with a number of other features that herald the advent of modernity,

effectively displacing an older model of freely circulating sociality (idealised in the Italian villa) with organisational forms that privileged efficiency, circulation and, above all, privacy. The corridor contributes to an architecture responsible for ‘obliterating vast areas of social experience – reducing noise transmission, differentiating movement patterns, suppressing smells ... veiling embarrassment, closeting indecency’.⁵⁴ In Evans’s account, the corridor embeds domestic privacy through sensory suppression. He draws on an illustrative example of Robert Kerr, author of *The Gentleman’s House*, who viewed architecture as an exercise in separating gentlemen from the irritations of daily life which Evans lists as ‘the mixing of servants and family, the racket of children, and the prattle of women’.⁵⁵ The corridor managed the infiltrative and intrusive flow of noise, separating labour zones from spaces of retreat, as well as preserving the family from accidental contact with servants obliged to travel through dedicated passageways. Such a house spatially enshrines – and generalises – the principal of separating the production of noise from the experience of civility as irreconcilable opposites.

⁵⁴ Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997): 90.

⁵⁵ Evans, *Translations from Drawing*, 77.

(Illustration) Thomas Henry Alken, British Museum. Tom and Bob in search of the Antique, 1821. © The Trustees of the British Museum