**Abstract**

This essay seeks to demonstrate how David Bowie’s (New) Romantic project engaged with spatial understandings that became embedded in poetic practices in early-nineteenth-century Britain. Building on Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s—fundamentally spatial—concept of the “I AM,” this essay suggests that spatial readings of Bowie’s “Major Tom” series can help us to echolocate innovative forms of (New) Romantic identities. More than this, it argues that reading Bowie’s tracks in light of Romantic concepts might assist in our ongoing project to engage with and respond to earlier works in ways that productively bring modern technological and spatial experiences to bear on historical literatures.

**Biographical Note**

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**“I Am” a “Space Oddity”: Echolocating (New) Romanticism in David Bowie**

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In his sonnet “The Poet,” published in the *North of England Magazine* in February 1842, Hartley Coleridge mused that the poet “smit with love of fame” must accept their own vanishing. In a sense, Hartley pushed a Keatsian negative capability to its logical conclusion: the poet’s inevitable fate is to become, like Ovid’s Echo, “a nothing, save a voice, a name, / Which lives, when other voices give it birth” (91). Indeed, according to Hartley it is only in this extreme form of containment—a synecdochal reduction from body to voice—that the poet can hope for expansive influence. The poet’s very identity is expressed in the echo between the poetic self and the wider world, and particularly between the poet’s work and repetitions of it.

How this same relationship between space, echo and identity operates in David Bowie’s corpus—and how it can be better understood when read through and as Romanticism—is what I want to explore in this essay. When Bowie reflected on his creative relationship with Tony Visconti—the producer with whom he worked intermittently from his second album in 1969 until his last in 2016—he concluded that what made their collaboration so effective was that they knew “between [them], how to landscape a song and give it a real place, an identity and a character” (qtd. in Pareles). This landscaping generated lyric and sonic spaces that encourage a “collapse” (Cinque, Moore, and Redmond 4) of the boundaries between artist and listener, track and text, song world and real world. Bowie’s works, in short, deployed odd relationships to and in space as complex metaphors through which to explore the connection between the self and the wider world.

To investigate how Bowie deploys spatiality to explore a form of (New) Romantic selfhood, I focus on one of his most iconic, and most Romantic, characters: Major Tom, the enigmatic spaceman who appears both in Bowie’s early music of the late sixties and—paratextually at least—on his last album. By tracing Major Tom’s evolution throughout Bowie’s corpus—from “Space Oddity,” through “Ashes to Ashes” and “Hallo Spaceboy,” to “Blackstar”—I demonstrate how his metamorphosis is registered most strongly in (New) Romantic spatial oddities. In tracing these synergies, my aim is to demonstrate how Bowie’s (New) Romanticism engaged with spatial understandings that became embedded in poetic practice in early nineteenth-century Britain.

More than this, though, I want to indicate the ways in which (re-)reading Bowie in light of Romanticism also asks us to re-assess some of our thinking about the Romantics, wherein ‘New Romanticism’ is not simply a descendent of Romanticism proper, but offers something of its own back. That is to say, considering Bowie’s material as a descendent of Romantic poetry asks us to reconsider how we respond to those earlier texts, and highlights these earlier works as the products of a similarly rich perceptual field to that which inspired Bowie. Bowie’s corpus emphasises a kind of multi-sensory perception that, as Barish Ali and Heidi Wallace astutely note, disrupts “the boundaries between author, text, audience and culture” (263). The unsettling of these boundaries is a distinctively Romantic concern, and returning to Romanticism via Bowie highlights the importance of paying attention to embodied creativity. In particular, Bowie emphasises sound’s role in negotiating the relationship between the self and the world in ways that have often remained underappreciated in Romantic-era works—although this neglect has begun to be rectified in recent years.[[1]](#endnote-1) To align these issues, I want to suggest that Bowie drew on the imaginative possibilities of notions about contained expansion that emerged in—and, I think, were fundamental for understandings of—Romantic literature. The imaginative possibilities of contained space found their most powerful expression in the use of the echo as trope and metaphor for the (New) Romantic creative self.

**Coleridge and Bowie’s “great I Am”**

The most strident definition of selfhood in the Romantic period depends precisely on the interplay between containment and expansion that Hartley Coleridge and David Bowie identify as being core to expressions of individual identity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s concept of the Imagination depended upon motion within a contained space. At its most successful, the Imagination could queer the boundaries between subject and object. The wealth of scholarly interpretations of Coleridge’s theories of the Imagination and the “I Am” notwithstanding, little attention has been paid to the fact that Coleridge conceived of the Imagination as an essentially spatial construct.[[2]](#endnote-2) Imagination was a mode that facilitated a self-discovery based upon what Helen Vendler terms “lyric intimacy”; it depended for its origins on circumscribed boundaries, and it was the transgressing of those borders which revealed self-knowledge. The primary Imagination was a form of motion that operated through the movement of the “finite mind” within the “infinite I AM” (*Biographia* I:304), by which Coleridge meant “spirit, self, and self-consciousness” (*Biographia* I:273). The primary Imagination depended, in other words, upon an interplay between containment in the finite and expansion into the infinite.

The secondary Imagination, meanwhile, was the “echo” of the primary; it “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to recreate” (*Biographia* I:304). Jonathan Wordsworth thinks that this phrasing is proof that the secondary Imagination was less important for Coleridge than the primary; he finds that the word “echo” suggests a “diminishment” (75). Yet, in this instance, the echo’s diffusion does not necessarily render the effect weaker; in fact, Coleridge thought that this diffusion caused an erasure of the boundary between the self and God, allowing them to blend together. At its most successful—the generation of “the absolute I AM”—the Imagination could lead to a discovery of the divine in the self, and the self in the divine. And the echo—the “*act of writing itself*,” as Wordsworth interprets it (83)—linked this divine self to the rest of Creation; Coleridge concluded his “Literary Life” with the thought that the “filial WORD” of “the great I AM” created a “choral echo [which] is the universe” (*Biographia* II:247–48). Here, it is not just the poet’s voice that lives through other voices; God himself depends for his influence on the echoes created by individual voices and texts. As Denis Flannery suggests is the case for Bowie’s sounds, the Coleridgean Imagination is a force that can “queer” the limits of the self, leading to new understandings of the individual’s sense of identity and relationship to the cosmos.

Bowie’s version of the “I Am” is inherited from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who Coleridge anticipated in believing that the “I Am” cannot be demarcated. Instead, it “moves outwards” to provide personal, phenomenological definition to the physical, moral, and historical worlds (Merleau-Ponty ix). It has seemed to a number of Bowie scholars that this move outwards is indicative of a form of liminality that translates into a loss of selfhood. Ian Chapman finds that liminality indicates Bowie’s perpetual fear about a such a loss (2015), whilst Nicholas Greco conceives of Bowie’s liminal space as a kind of labyrinth: Bowie “enters into it and is lost,” he thinks (164). But what Greco and Chapman interpret as liminality is, in Bowie’s own terms, a “third dimension” (Yentob 1975). It is a queer landscape, located between the borders of established spaces, which translates a loss of selfhood into something more like an excess of it. Yet—as I want to demonstrate in the remainder of this essay—Bowie recalls Coleridge in foregrounding the role of the echo in the discovery of the “I Am.” In Bowie’s works, the echo is the principal means of communicating this new idea of the “I Am”; it opens out new possibilities for the individual to diffuse and diffract into what Shelton Waldrep calls “performances of self.”

**Echolocation and (New) Romanticism**

When Drew Daniel writes that sound—“*not music*,” he clarifies, “*but sound*”—is uniquely able to queer the boundaries between individual, community, and environment, he posits a theory of listening that is fundamentally indebted to the kind of Romantic imaginary I have been outlining. By its very nature, Daniel argues, sound operates through a disruption of the boundaries between inside and outside; whilst it can reinforce our sense of individuality through its creation of a personal sonic experience, what Daniel calls the “promiscuous open-ness of the ear” means that “[s]ound intrudes upon us with the fact of the world” Listening itself, in this reading, becomes a form of contained expansion, whereby intrusion “affords us the possibility of forgetting . . . attachments to our subjective particularity and affiliation and instead forces us to register the everywhere of an ongoing being, an outside where we thought there was no outside.” Sound, meanwhile, becomes a unique way of communicating both the tensions and affinities between the individual and a “perceptual community” that links us to “the world beyond that community.” In short, Daniel concludes, sound “blurs the edges” of the self.

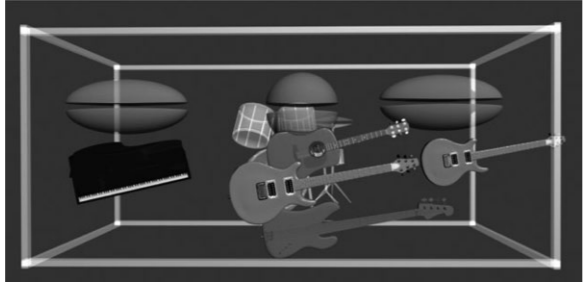
Daniel believes this process to be specific to sound, rather than music—or, at least, recorded music—because the kind of queerness he describes relies upon the true experience of what he calls an “immanent occasion”; since recording fixes a certain sound in place, it removes the possibility for sonic spontaneity that Daniel sees as central to sound’s inherent queerness. But what not even recording music can do is to fix the affect it produces in the listener—and, in Romantic thinking, it was affect that distinguished music from sound. John Ruskin, for instance, drew on the philosophies of Plato and Hesiod when he clarified in *Fors Clavigera* (1875) that “the Greeks only called ‘Music’ the kind of sound which induced right moral feeling . . . and any other kind of sound than that, however beautiful to the ear or scientific in composition, they did not call ‘Music’” (261). The recognition of such feelings relied on a listener trained in the art of translating a sonic “impulse on the organ” into an “observation of the mind.” The physical quality of sound, and the ability to hear it, was only part of the point, as Ruskin explained in “The Queen of the Air” (1869):

It is quite true that the tympanum of the ear vibrates under sound, and that the surface of the water in a ditch vibrates too: but the ditch hears nothing for all that; and my hearing is still to me as blessed a mystery as ever, and the interval between the ditch and me, quite as great. If the trembling sound in my ears was once of the marriage bell which began my happiness, and is now of the passing bell which ends it, the difference between those two sounds to me cannot be counted by the number of concussions. (354)

Ruskin acknowledges something that Daniel risks overlooking: that both sound and music can mean something different at every encounter, a reflection of the influence that social codes and personal circumstances have on the act of listening. Ruskin acknowledges the role of feeling in listening: he concludes that music is a combination of the soundwave with the listener’s affective response to it. In this sense, music becomes sound properly interpreted. It is this kind of slippage between sound and music with which Bowie’s corpus plays; in seeking to affect his listener’s space as much as to communicate a track-specific sonic world, Bowie floats in a most peculiar way between, as Denis Flannery observes, “recognition and anonymity, the cohering force of music and the dissolving, queering effect of sound” (159). Bowie’s material mediates between coherence and dissolution, and between sound and music, in part through the careful ways in which it was landscaped to communicate a sense of spatiality through both his lyrics and the record’s sonic formation of space. Bowie’s aim was not to induce a Ruskinian “right moral feeling”; rather, these tracks created a contained space in which feeling—as a changeable, mutable experience—could be explored as the centre-point of a form of individualism which acknowledged that individuality need not be fixed.

This is, perhaps, particularly true of “Space Oddity,” which self-consciously marks out a form of soundbox, a musicological concept that visualises music as a four-dimensional model and attempts, Ruth Dockwray and Allan F. Moore explain, to map the “locations of sound sources in recordings” (182). It offers a way of “conceptualizing the textural space that a recording inhabits, by enabling us to literally hear recordings taking space” (Moore 30), and creates a visualization that allows the analyst to ask where particular sounds appear to be coming from (Figure 1). The soundbox is envisaged as a contained space, but there are two key ways of enlarging it: reverberation and echo (Moore 46). Peter Doyle has written extensively about the generic differences between these two effects but, to summarise drastically, he defines reverberation as something that seems to continue a sound, whilst an echo repeats it. John Hollander offers a nuance to this definition in his study of figurative echoes in poetry after Milton, when he notes that the distinction is partly temporal: echoes reach the ear approximately one-fifteenth of a second after reverberations thanks to the fact that an echo must travel to and from a reflective surface (1). Before sound recording technologies were developed in the mid-nineteenth century, echoes—“and,” Hollander writes, “perhaps parrots”—were the only real means of perpetuating sound (1–2).

**Figure 1: Example soundbox: The Kinks, “Lola.” Reproduced from Dockwray and Moore (2010), 193.**



Doyle thinks that the echo is especially tricky to interpret, because it leads us “further into the area of connotation.” In “teasing . . . meanings out,” he thinks, “we run the risk of overinterpreting, or of misreading” (14). In this reading, the echo might be a key part of a song’s transition into a text. By the 1960s, echoes—and their counterpart, reverberation—were a standard element of pop music. Doyle shows how music from this period—building on the rockabilly, rock n roll and jazz traditions of the 1940s and 50s, under the influence of which Bowie grew up—took advantage of stereo recording, and the possibilities for echo and reverb it afforded, to make spatiality “a new component in the musical totality” (5). The studio space in which these effects were created was particularly suggestive (Doyle 6); it is, perhaps, the ultimate symbol from this era of the creative possibilities afforded by enclosure. Phil Spector’s ‘Wall of Sound’—a mode of production that foregrounded the interplay between an exaggerated musical texture and the close confinement of the studio—is perhaps the best-known use of this new space (Moorefield 11–12). For Doyle, as for Oliver Read and Walter Welch, this new sense of sonic spatiality was fundamentally Romantic; it was, they think, Romanticism which brought “the listener into the studio or auditorium” (377). The echo became an important element in communicating a Romantic “world-creating demiurge” (Doyle 58). As a phenomenon entirely dependent on containment, the echo was particularly suggestive of a “sublime dreamed world” conjured by the artist (Doyle 5).

The echo is a record—or a “memory,” as Sean Street terms it (3)—of sound’s interactions with the environment. Formed by soundwaves’ reflections from a surface, an echo depends for its formation on a degree of containment, but its repetitions of a sound event make it a vehicle for a sense—both physical and imaginative—of vastness. The echo exaggerates what George Revill identifies as the core properties of heard sounds by giving “embodied sensation to properties of depth, distance and proximity” (247). Echoes or reverberations—and the related concept of resonance—each emphasise an ecological relationship between sound and listener, but the echo’s relationship to space makes it distinctive. As Hollander explains,

[i]n modern discourse, the word *echo* is used figuratively to indicate a musical or linguistic repetition, usually of a short utterance or the terminal portion of a longer one, with the additional qualification that the repeated sound is not only contingent upon the first, but *in some way a qualified version of it* (3; emphasis added)

What Hollander does not explicitly acknowledge, though, is that these qualifications are both figurative and physical: an echo returns a weaker version of the original sound—a kind of “speaking silence,” as Christina Rossetti memorably termed it (314). Each repetition of an image or idea alters the original in some way that develops or complicates its meaning. An echo also changes the way sound is perceived in space, transforming it from a mono-directional entity into a multi-directional experience. That makes conceiving of a track’s soundbox more difficult; the artist who deploys the echo deliberately complicates what Drew Daniel might call the locatability of the sonic experience. By challenging a sound source’s identity in these ways, the echo might also effect an ontological shift from music back to sound.

Such performances of unlocatability thus emphasise what Daniel calls “the queerness of sound”; since the echo is in itself based on dissolution and diffusion, it is in itself a queer—and queering—experience. Daniel takes this concept further by suggesting that sound might help us to “echolocate the edges of subjection.” This is a powerful metaphor for thinking about the (New) Romantic self. Echolocation, a natural cartographic tool that situates the individual within their environment, becomes in Daniel’s reading an ecological process that both reinforces an individual’s private subjectivity and positions them as part of a system that might be local, national or global. But it was in Romantic writing that the echo became a particularly potent metaphor for creativity as well as a popular means through which to explore new places: Goethe’s and Rousseau’s enjoyment of the Venetian gondoliers’ echoing voices was just one instance of the echo’s important role in personal understandings of space and spatiality (Agnew 73–74). By the Victorian period, sound, soundwaves, and echoes were widely enough understood concepts to feature prominently in popular advertising campaigns and the works of influential authors, not least Charles Dickens, George Eliot (Picker 8–10), and—as we have already seen—Hartley Coleridge.

A century later, when Bowie too was asking “who are we / So small in times such as these” (“Slow Burn”), advancements in sound technologies offered portals through which to explore tensions between personal space and global spatiality. Peter Doyle goes so far as to associate the fascination with space in music, witnessed throughout the 1960s, with the new-found portability of what he calls “virtual spatiality” that the development of stereo equipment had facilitated (6). As Bowie discovered, these technologies meant that sound could be employed both metaphorically and literally to explore the individual artist or listener’s connection to the world around them. One answer to that question—who are we?—posits that, for Bowie as for Simon and Garfunkel, the “echoes in tenement halls” might hold some important answers.

The possibilities communicated by the physical echo, and held open by the imaginative one, are brought together in Bowie’s penultimate release, “Blackstar.” “Blackstar” alternates between declaring all the things that Bowie is not—a film star, a pop star, a marvel star—and what he is: a Blackstar, which Bowie’s vocals confirm when he echoes the mantra. This is a subversive, playful echo: the main vocalist repeats the backing vocals, rather than the other way around. The interplay between the two marks out a sonic third space, in the middle of which is what the lyrics label “the great I Am.” The line is adapted, via Merleau-Ponty and Coleridge, from God’s declaration to Moses: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14). Bowie turns this into a playful declaration of precisely the kind of blending between the human and the divine which Coleridge had mused upon. “The great I Am,” here, is a rebuttal to the previous line’s summary of his early critics’ dismissals: “you’re a flash in the pan.” When Bowie responds by declaring himself to be “the great I Am,” it is a Coleridgean claim for creative, poetic greatness that celebrates the slipperiness of (New) Romantic selfhood: the “Great I Am” can be the “I Am” of a great many things.

**[Figure 2: Excerpt from “Blackstar” video (2015). Licensed to YouTube by EMI Music Publishing, UBEM, BMI - Broadcast Music Inc., LatinAutor, União Brasileira de Compositores, and 10 music rights societies.]**



The allusions in the “Blackstar” video to a lost spaceman link this affirmation of “the great I Am” back to Major Tom. In the video’s opening scene, the link between the astronaut and the Blackstar are made explicit through the framing of the spacesuit by a ring of black stars. This intertextual echo makes clear that Bowie had been considering questions about expansion, containment, and their effect on the self since early in his career—and that Major Tom remained the key for echolocating Bowie’s (New) Romantic self.

**Odd Spatiality in “Space Oddity”**

“Space Oddity” was Bowie’s “antidote to space fever” (qtd. in Doggett 53). The dystopian consequences of humanity’s expansion into outer space had been starkly imagined in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), the film that inspired Bowie’s track, and “Space Oddity” also communicates a profound ambivalence towards the space race. The song’s tone appears to have been missed by some of its early listeners, though; it was first aired on the BBC, apparently without irony, during TV coverage of the moon landing on 20 July 1969 (Doggett 53). Nevertheless, this event marked “Space Oddity” as the anthem for new forms of questioning about earth-bound and extra-terrestrial individualisms. It does so by immersing the listener in the dialectics of contained expansion that “Space Oddity” both describes and, through its deployment of complex narrative and structural echoes, enacts. These echoes foreground the track’s interest in spatiality, as well as space, and—in Doyle’s terms, inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—makes its “territorial project fully explicit” (17): this is somewhere the “I Am” might be discovered.

**Figure 3: David Bowie, “Space Oddity” (1972). Licensed to YouTube by WMG (on behalf of PLG UK Catalog); ARESA, EMI Music Publishing, Fly Records, IMPEL, UBEM, ASCAP, LatinAutor, and 14 music rights societies.**



“Space Oddity” imagines the journey of one astronaut, Major Tom, into outer space. This endeavour turns Tom into a celebrity—“the papers” become desperate to know “whose shirts [he] wear[s]”—but Tom ultimately rejects this exaggerated celebration of consumer-centred individualism; he leaves the capsule and, bidding farewell to his wife, disconnects from Ground Control to float away from both the technologies and peoples that bind him to earth. This journey is echoed in the track’s musical structure, which Brad Erickson thinks “models escape from terrestrial confinement” (564–65): the way it fades out at the end seems to follow Major Tom’s floating away into space. The effect, as Peter Doggett poetically puts it, is to “[leave] the listener uncertain where they might touch down” (56). For Michael Mooradian Lupro, on the other hand, Major Tom’s disappearance into space offers more than a sense of freedom: it indicates the character’s embracing of “difference” as he willingly moves into “a place unbound by terrestrial norms of comportment and expression” (14). The narrative and structure both reinforce this odd sense of the individual’s dissolution into an unknown space.

But “Space Oddity” does not just mimic the space experienced by Major Tom. As Lupro puts it, Major Tom “intertwines with our understanding of what it might be like to exist as a real human being in real space” (14). The track’s auditory space becomes the listener’s tin can, and it inscribes a sonic orbit around the listener that enfolds them into a space that blends the fictional song world with their real one. The way the track fades in at the beginning and out again at the end positions the listener alongside Tom as the centre of its journey. In Ken McLeod’s words, it “mediates our internal space (feelings, desires, dreams) with external space (the physical, the experienced)” (337). It encourages the listener to make the same discovery as Major Tom: that ultimate freedom might arise out of extreme containment.

This spatiality operates through the technologies the song employs as much as those which support Major Tom’s journey: for “Space Oddity,” Bowie insisted—against his producer’s advice—on a recording technique that was still rare in the late 1960s, and which emphasises the song’s intent to contain the listener in a space of its own. Throughout the track, Bowie’s voice shifts, as Lupro explains, “from singular centred to multiple stereo” (20). The effect, Ali and Wallace argue, is to transform Bowie’s voice into “both subject and object of its own enunciations” (275). When those shifts occur is crucial. The first line is spoken by a single voice: that of one person in Ground Control. Bowie’s voice splits in the second line; a low-pitched voice sings in the listener’s right ear, and is doubled by one singing an octave higher in their left. When the countdown begins, this higher voice becomes the countdown, leaving its companion to continue communicating with the astronaut. The effect is to place the listener alongside Major Tom inside the capsule, surrounded by Ground Control’s plural commanding voices. This doubling is echoed imperfectly when we first hear from Major Tom; to begin with, the voice is singular, but as he steps “through the door” it splits as Ground Control’s had done. So far, Major Tom and his controllers are in line with each other. But when Major Tom notices how “very different” the stars look from this angle, and locates himself in this queer space—“for here am I”—the vocals alter: now, the lower-pitched voice comes from the left. For Lupro, these stereo vocals resituate Major Tom from a celebrity—an extreme form of individualistic selfhood—into “a universal cosmopolitan speaking uneasily for, of, and to, multiplicitous positions” (20). This echo indicates a subtle, yet significant, shift in Tom’s sense of identity.

This change occurs as Tom begins to feel the effects of anti-gravitational forces; he finds himself “floating in a most peculiar way.” But this peculiarity is made ambiguous by Bowie’s mode of singing the line, adding a syllable so that it actually sounds like Tom is “floating in a most a-peculiar way.” In this way, the line holds the potential both for oddness and normalcy (Flannery 161; Lupro 20). In either case, Tom finds that his mode of perception is altered: “the stars look very different” from this angle. This new form of motion, as Flannery perceptively observes, “involves a massive change, either in the world(s) around one or in the way in which that world is apprehended, or in a fusion, always theatrical, of both” (161).[[3]](#endnote-3) It holds the possibility for multiple versions of the future. Initially, Tom situates himself within an exaggeratedly everyday earthly object in a way that highlights his affinity with his home planet: “here am I sitting in a tin can / far above the world.” Yet, there is an echo in the line that indicates a subtle shift in meaning: “I Am” becomes “am I.” The shift is significant: “am I” contains the potential for plurality, in a way that the more definitive “I Am” may not. Just as each echo subtly changes the expression of an initial sound, offering multiple experiences of the same root source, so do “Space Oddity”’s lyrics encode the possibility that Major Tom might encode multiple selves. As soon as Major Tom steps through the door, his confident declarations of selfhood invert, and that odd formulation indicates a new fluidity in his terrestrial sense of self. An implied question—am I?—hovers with Tom around the space ship. The second time the line is repeated, Tom provides a different locus for his sense of identity; now, Tom expresses ownership over the tin can, and positions himself not in relation to earth, but to the moon. The fact that “planet earth is blue / and there’s nothing I can do” is no longer, in this second utterance, merely a statement of fact, but an acknowledgement of individual impotence in the face of a global problem—environmental degradation—and the individualistic human condition.

It is while he’s floating in this way that Major Tom is able to echolocate a mappable point. Doggett thinks that the guitar solo that offers an interlude in the interstellar conversation between Tom and Ground Control “seemed to be testing out the walls of Major Tom’s prison” (56). Certainly, it is in this break that Tom seems to undergo the “sort of transformation” that Niall Boyce believes befalls him (528). Tom’s floating has caused him to re-evaluate his relationship to Ground Control and the society they represent. When Ground Control loses contact with their astronaut, their panic is evident in the high-pitched stereo vocals through which they repeatedly ask: “Can you hear me?” This question morphs into Major Tom’s declaration that he is “here.” This echo, from “hear” to “here,” indicates the discovery of a space in which Bowie can echolocate a new sense of identity for Major Tom that is predicated on the relationship between space, sound and listening. His “floating” no longer seems peculiar, but rather allows him to effect a reversal of the earlier containment: now, it is he who encircles the spaceship. It is at this moment that Tom’s understanding of the “I Am” alters: this is when he becomes—to adapt Coleridge’s terms—a finite being moving in infinite space. It’s at this moment, too, that the grand-sounding “capsule” becomes nothing more than a “tin can,” while Tom stops aligning himself with the terrestrial community and begins to consider himself a space oddity.

Major Tom’s metamorphosis is registered most strongly through alterations in this spatial relationship between Tom and the tin can, between inside and outside, and between the “I Am” and “I Am Not.” The “unearthly” stereo vocals, alongside what McLeod calls the “series of atonal and rhythmically irregular tape effects and electronic squelches in combination with an ethereal string section” (341), emphasise how queer—or how odd—space itself is in this track. It highlights the ways Major Tom feels himself to be different from the people he has left behind. Tom’s sense of alienation, resulting in what Lupro believes is a “metaphorical *social* suicide” (22), seems like the logical extreme of the individualism from which he excludes himself. In a sense, Major Tom rejects individualism in order to embrace his own individuality. As Tom’s afterlives suggest, however, this kind of anti-social action is not considered a virtue by the community on the blue earth.

**Echoing “Space Oddity”: I Am (not) Major Tom**

Bowie’s final performance of the 1970s was of “Space Oddity” on *Kenny Everett’s New Year’s Eve Show* in the UK and *Dick Clarke’s Salute to the Seventies* in the US. Doggett reads this moment as the dissembling of a key Bowie myth in the face of a new age of Thatcherite social conservatism:

The oddity was no longer the individual ostracised from society but, in the Britain of Thatcher’s government, the person who still dared to believe in the power of collective action and the ability of society to care for all of its members, however alienated they might be (309).

The kind of (New) Romantic identity that attempted to negotiate the relationship between individual and society seemed to be dead. In its place was a philosophy that valorised individualism but suspected individuality. Major Tom’s fate was illustrative of the damaging effects of the ostracization to which this new age might lead. Bowie’s performance of the track indicated that it was no longer only a space-age anthem; it was also a powerful metaphor for a drug culture that emphasised what might happen when an individual collided with the social order.

When Bowie performed “Space Oddity” on *Kenny Everett*, his performance indicated a shift in the way that Major Tom’s declaration of individuality might be read. The prolonged silence after Ground Control sends “God’s love” to Tom allows Bowie to cross the stage from acoustic guitar to piano, but also leaves a significant emptiness in which Tom, we imagine, lifts off alone. In this version, Tom is disconnected both from Ground Control and, when he arrives at his orbit, from space itself: now, Tom tells Ground Control that he is simply “floating far above the moon.” He seems, now, not to be actually in space, but rather to be experiencing the kind of lonely drug trip with which Bowie’s jerky movements, twitching face and anxious posture—moving between sets with his arms tightly folded—suggest familiarity. More than this, Bowie performs the song on a stage made to look like the padded room of an asylum. The performance suggested an alternative fate for Major Tom. He had not, in the manner of Bowie’s other guises, been artistically killed off; rather, he metamorphoses yet again, from a spaceman-turned-alien into an earth-bound, if delusional, junkie who retrospectively anticipates the Thin White Duke.

After this, Major Tom became one of Bowie’s most distinctive and long-lasting echoes—but each time he appears, in the true nature of an echo, he seems to get weaker. John Hollander calls this characteristic the echo’s “decaying dynamics” (3), and it is an apt metaphor for Major Tom. After “Space Oddity,” Major Tom’s identity—his sense of the “I Am”—seems to diminish as the echoes fade. Doyle might add that this effect renders the echo incapable of communicating a solid sense of identity; at some point, the echo is “spread too thinly to ‘hold’ the territory” (18). Tom never speaks for himself again after “Space Oddity,” but others pass judgement on his mental and physical state. In “Ashes to Ashes,” perhaps Major Tom’s most (in)famous subsequent appearance, “we know Major Tom’s a junkie.” More than that, Major Tom’s excessive individualism has become a threat to social and personal productivity: “to get things done,” the narrator is repeatedly told, “you better not mess with Major Tom.” The reference might be to Tom himself, or to the cocaine, alcohol, and cigarettes with which Bowie himself was by now associated. For Waldrep, this coded reference “nominally recasts Major Tom . . . to use him as a stand-in for Bowie himself” (91). Each time these lines are repeated, the warning against Major Tom becomes starker, and the line between the character and the artist—the boundaries necessary for the (New) Romantic “I Am”—are increasingly blurred. Major Tom’s inverted expression of self—“am I”—contains increasing tensions throughout each of these echoes; they offer dark parodies of individualism that seem, in Major Tom’s case, to have brought about a troubling plurality that is reinforced through each of the character’s iterations (that is, until “Blackstar”).

These weakening echoes perhaps reach their apotheosis in “Hallo Spaceboy,” from Bowie’s 1995 album *1. Outside*. Waldrep thinks that this album is where Bowie’s “presentations of his performative selves” reached their peak (18), and that seems to be true of Major Tom. The track plays with notions of bounded identities and sexualities—“Do you like girls or boys? / It’s confusing these days”—and its almost excessive echoing enacts the sense of “chaos” that the lyrics describe. The track’s central tension is between bodily constraint and freedom, containment and expansion:

Spaceboy, you’re sleepy now

Your silhouette is so stationary

You’re released but your custody calls

And I wanna to be free

Don’t you wanna be free?

This verse, and the chorus that follows, is repeated twice throughout the song—and, more than that, an echo shadows almost every word. Bowie’s voice reverberating around the songspace reinforces the track’s repetitious nature, but emphasises, too, an ongoing attempt to echolocate Major Tom’s (New) Romantic individuality. In “Hallo Spaceboy,” the Major Tom figure has become naturalised in space; not quite an alien, nor is he any longer straightforwardly human. Nevertheless, he remains a companion in the struggle to negotiate individual boundaries: although he is “released”—presumably from terrestrial constraints—he is not able fully to discard a sense of imprisonment. Freedom seems to exist, here, in a third dimension between girls and boys, inside and outside, the “I Am” and the I am not.

Although “Hallo Spaceboy” is preoccupied with saying “bye bye” to Major Tom, his death is not confirmed until Bowie’s penultimate video. In “Blackstar,” Bowie asserts that he has become a different kind of star, and the song plays with the very nature of the echo: this time, Major Tom seems to return more strongly than any time since “Space Oddity.” The treatment of Major Tom’s remains reinforces that oddity: his bejewelled skull becomes the focus of a ritual at the heart of a labyrinthine city, whilst the rest of his skeleton floats, peculiarly, away, morphing into the eponymous black star. This is when two of Bowie’s identities—his first and his last—collide. That intertextual echo effects an erasure of the boundaries between selves that Coleridge described, bringing with it all the versions of Major Tom that have accumulated along the way: astronaut, junkie, spaceboy and relic. In the end, as Coleridge also indicated, at this point nothing remains but the words, echoing in and through new kinds of spatial and individual oddities. But this diffusion is not aesthetically or philosophically a weakness: Major Tom himself become a “choral echo,” morphs into the universe and indicates Bowie’s own diffusion into “the Great I Am.” The echoes that Bowie wrote, performed, and recorded located a (New) Romantic individualism that interrogated its own identity both within and without (extra-)terrestrial communities.

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1. Angela Leighton’s recent study *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* has adeptly explored how sound functions as a literary device from the late Romantics onward, but the importance of sound as a Romantic historical and literary phenomenon has been considered recently by scholars including Matthew Rowney, Michele Speitz and Susan Wolfson (see Works Cited for the relevant publications). I have also written on this topic elsewhere (see “Echoes in the Mountains: The Romantic Lake District’s Soundscape”). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jonathan Wordsworth offers a helpful overview of the most prescient of interpretations up to the mid-1980s. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Lupro, by contrast, thinks that floating becomes mundane over the course of the song. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)