Romanticism and Sound Studies: Recording Romantic Relationality

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Introduction: Sound Studies in Romanticism

This collection takes up two interrelated questions. One, how might the interdisciplinary field of sound studies change the way we engage with Romantic literature? Two, how can sound studies foment broader inquiries into a range of Romanticisms not exclusive to British Romanticism? Inspired by such thinking, the essays gathered here attest to how sound studies can uncover a multisensorial Romanticism steeped in narratives of experiential history not limited to Romantic literatures of just one place or people or time. As questions of multisensory meaning and experience arise as a red thread running across the volume, attendant questions pertaining to the stakes of human relationality both in a social sense and an environmental one become impossible to ignore. The volume stands as a fresh complement to 2008 *Praxis* volume edited by Susan J. Wolfson and titled “[Soundings of Things Done”: The Poetry and Poetics of Sound in the Romantic Ear and Era](https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/soundings/index.html). While those generative essays deal chiefly with “the sounding sense of Romantic poetry, both thematically (a poetics of sound) and sensually/phonically (the poetry of sound and the sound of poetry),” this volume studies sound through a wider cross-section of Romantic genres. This includes not poetry alone but also periodicals, drama, and the novel as well as governmental, musical, and scientific literature (1). And whereas the previous volume foregrounds Wordsworthian poetics and a smaller subset of authors of British Romanticism, these essays increase their reach to include a wider array of writers, German Romanticism, and extra-Romantic historical and contemporary documents on sound, voice, and song.

This collection, then, begins to open up larger conversations for scholars and readers of Romantic-era literature and culture such that they might consider a wider assortment of representations of sounds, silences, voices, calls, quietudes, volumes, modes of listening, sensing, and interpreting sonic experiences, including human and nonhuman sound-bound relations. By so doing—in some small yet important way—these essays herald Dylan Robinson’s recent call to acknowledge “how writing allows certain moments of sonic experience to be heard while foreclosing upon others” and how a person’s “positionality guides the way [they] listen” (1). There is a politics to how we make sense of sound, how we mark sonic experiences, how we record practices of listening, voicing, sounding, hearing—as Steingo and Sykes remind us, nearly two decades ago Jonathan Sterne noted in the *Audible Past* “that, in the West, the ‘differences between hearing and seeing’ … [are] *ideologically loaded* (2 original emphasis).

Sterne’s iconic essay, “Sonic Imagination” from *The Sound Studies Reader* (2012), defines sound studies as an interdisciplinary project “that takes sound as its analytical point of departure or arrival” (2). To “*think sonically*” entails “analyzing both sonic practices and the discourses and institutions that describe them” (2). The task of the critic of sound studies, then, is to “redescribe what sound does in the human world, and what humans do in the sonic world,” to “always go beyond … common-sense categories” to uncover “what we don’t already know” (2). In keeping with Sterne’s definition, the essays appearing here attune readers to Romantic representations of human sonic worlds as well as more-than-human sonic worlds to underscore the key parts played therein by sound. Across the whole, the volume experiments with making sense of Romantic literature by way of sound studies. Consequently, and as this volume’s readers will learn for themselves, every one of these essays features questions of relationality. In this sense, the volume coheres in the manner of a chorus uniting voices of all sorts that in this instance cannot but sing of relationality because sound does not exist in a vacuum and because its histories are more contingently experiential than broadly universal.

Each author demonstrates how sound studies alerts us to key dimensions of Romantic literatures and cultures that we didn’t already know. The collection moves from rethinking modes of lyric listening to discovering the role that sonic thinking and feeling plays in conceptualizing the Romantic power of the imagination. It registers the ways in which sonic terror operates in the gothic novel. It broadcasts how understanding sound not only in a narrow auditory sense but as a relational multisensory experience enables us to reconceive Romanticism’s models of epistemology, ecology, and aesthetics. Sound studies makes it impossible to *un*hear Romantic literature’s preoccupation with ways of knowing and feeling that couple together this sensory mode with that, ultimately complicating simplistic accounts of the imperial, oppressive primacy of the visual.

In homage to the original *Praxis* volume on sound and its nuanced discussions of British Romantic lyric in particular, this volume’s opening essays stage a veritable dialogue on representations of sound in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s classic poem “Frost at Midnight.” Mina Gorji’s and Elizabeth Weybright’s respective treatments of one poem, Coleridge’s “Frost at Midnight”(c. 1798), showcase how reading Romantic poetry in light of the sound studies turn can yield profuse interpretive futures for studies in Romanticism.

Gorji’s “Lyric Listening” inquires into the place of sound and volume as well as listening – or the lack thereof - in lyric studies. Using Coleridge’s poem and lyric theory as key points of departure, Gorji notes how the word *volume* “acquired an acoustic register in the late eighteenth century” and explains that the *OED*’s first recorded use of the term bearing this new meaning is attributed to Byron’s *Werner* (1822) (para 3). Gorji contends that while “Frost at Midnight” does not use the term *volume* itself, the poem bespeaks a Coleridgean “preoccup[ation] with how to represent sounds and especially volume, and that his imaginative interest in acoustics and in musical forms and notation informed the way he shaped sound into both aural patterns and visual language in his poetry” (para 3).

Gorji questions how lyric poetry might serve as “a container for sound” or as an “expression of volume” through a richly contextualized interpretation of “Frost at Midnight.” The essay grapples with how the poem “records a playful exploration of dynamics and of the various ways (graphic, rhythmic, linguistic and as an effect of tempo) in which sound and quiet could be represented to both eye and ear in the poem” (para 3). Extending Susan Wolfson’s essay in particular from the previous *Praxis* volume on sound, Gorji thickens her consideration of “Frost at Midnight” with other contemporary and later lyric poetry to offer “the state of listening, hearkening” after “something” as *the* “poetic state” of Romantic lyric. Gorji gives readers new ways to think about “the significance of silence and quiet in Coleridge’s poems, and in Romantic lyric more widely,” with the essay ultimately calling for a “new kind of listening” and pushing “Lyric Studies [to expand] the range and frequency of its listening.”

Gorji’s work on Coleridge dovetails with Elizabeth Weybright’s “Unquiet Romanticism,” which likewise engages with “Frost at Midnight” and Wolfson’s “Sounding Romantic.” Yet Weybright’s approach departs from Gorji’s by offering a comparative reading of the poem that takes into account related representations of sound—and furthermore, noise—in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Percy Shelley’s *Mont Blanc.* Weybright’s essay demonstrates how “Romantic literary representations of listening present noise as an underpinning of phenomenological experience and audition” (23). Noise, as Romantic literature frames it, is “as an essential (sometimes involuntary) activity through which human subjects enter into self-reflective reciprocity with elements of their social and natural worlds” (23). In this sense, noise is defined as a dynamic interaction, one prompting humanity to recognize itself as always already in necessary dialogue with the cultural and natural worlds within which they reside. Building on influential theorizations of noise, sound, and silence penned by the likes of Jacques Attali, John Cage, Michael Chion, Jean-Luc Nancy, David Novak, Jonathan Sterne, Shelley Trower, Salomé Voegelin, and more, Weybright’s contribution to this volume resoundingly testifies to the rich upwellings of thought that arise from a conceptual terrain sensitive to both sound studies and studies of Romanticism.

Rather than reading “Frost at Midnight” from a musical perspective akin to Gorji’s project, Weybright centers her inquiry into Romantic lyric poetry around the question of “how sounds … far removed from anything like musical organization (or even the categories of tonal sound available at the turn of the nineteenth century) might be generative points of contact between the creative mind and the phenomenal world” (6-7). For Weybright, figurations of “‘quiet’ things made ‘unquiet’” become central to understanding sound as it relates to models of subjectivity in Romantic lyric, particularly as Romantic poets’ “approaches to quietly noisy sounds … refuse absolute epistemological or symbolic stability” (2, 3). Weybright argues “that for the Romantics, listening to unquiet noise is often both an active ‘straining’ to place oneself as a creative agent in relation to the world and—somewhat paradoxically—a compelled state of receptive embodiment” where noise is not understood “as a one-dimensionally overwhelming, distracting or painful thing, but rather was an ambiguous, sometimes baffling, and sometimes imaginatively provocative presence” (3, 4).

David Sigler’s essay dismantles the binary that counterpoises sound against vision. In “The sound of the gaze in Ann Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance*” Sigler troubles the simplistic formula that takes sound as the bearer of mystery and vision as the bringer of knowledge. In the end, Sigler deconstructs the gaze-as-bad/sound-as-good dichotomy extant within Radcliffe criticism, Gothic Studies, and Romantic Studies more generally. The essay notes that in Radcliff’s novel, “sound … asks to be seen” and “show[s] vision to be an aspect of sound,” all of which allows Sigler to unearth “the psychic consequences of that sensory entanglement” (1, 4). It is less that we cannot know sound in Sigler’s analysis of Radcliff’s gothic novel, and more that - like desire - sound yields an “excess of signification” that could never be fully determined. Thereby sound harbors the power to terrify with its potential to lead us into spaces of the unknown and indeterminate. Sigler’s approach pairs sound studies with psychoanalysis to demonstrate that by “thinking about sound through epistemologies of vision, Radcliff could respond to contemporary debates about gender, class, and privilege” (3). That is, sound has the capacity to play such a role in the novel precisely because “sound (including music, noise, and silence) had an important visual component in the eighteenth-century English culture, especially for the construction of gender” (4).

Sigler’s analysis of *A Sicilian Romance* confirms that “Radcliff hears lack as a positive presence in its own right, consistently crossing the visual and sonic registers to highlight a multisensory ambiguity” (28). Intriguingly, by thinking with sound studies approaches, Sigler unearths how “Radcliff subjects her characters to a sonic voyeurism that exceeds Foucauldian and Sartrean models of the gaze” (28). The essay offers a fresh understanding of the novel by conveying how “Radcliff challenges emergent visual epistemologies of the eighteenth century and reorganizes prevailing patterns of Enlightenment subjectivity” (28). Through a compelling assessment of the sonic contexts within which Radcliff’s characters are placed, Sigler stresses how “lack, in [Radcliff’s] account, is not something missing but something present and resonant” (28).

Joel Faflak’s contribution, “Shelley’s Sound Body,” turns upon questions of voice, vocal expression, and listening in Percy Shelley’s lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* to confront the ways in which sound challenges sense making even as it is derived of the senses. Faflak’s project “explore[s an] incompossibility between voice and the said” in Shelley’s lines (1). Akin to Sigler’s work, Faflak acknowledges that “Romanticism inherits from the Enlightenment a preoccupation with sight, visuality, and the gaze as both formative and troubling forms of how an emergent modernity increasingly comes to apprehend the world” (2). But at the same time, Faflak underscores that “in its preoccupation with voice and sound, however, Romanticism explores what this apprehension misses” (2). More to the point, Romanticism’s debates around voice and sound foreground compelling questions of human potential and right action, where the very act of listening assumes a political edge and bears great ontological weight. Such debates held across Romantic literature announce “that human potential ‘does not [necessarily] solidify in an object of fetish reverence’—the kind of reverence that [in *Prometheus Unbound*] guarantees tyranny as a symbol and method of prescribing what humans and thus the human itself can and should be” (2).

For Faflak, “sound in Shelley’s poem seems to be merely the medium” but in a sort of Kittleresque fashion “at the same time [sound] facilitates a mode of relationality that is the matrix of meaning itself without making meaning present” (23). Because sound acts as both medium and never-fully-present message in *Prometheus Unbound*, “sound insists on its own opacity,” and thus Shelley’s thinking chimes with Édourard Glissant’s when the latter writes of “the ‘errantry’ of ‘Totality’s imaginary [which] allows the detours that lead away from anything totalitarian’” (23). Faflak argues that *Prometheus Unbound* “asks us to listen without prejudice, as if that is ever possible” since counter to any “illusions of transparency … listening requires the implicit acknowledgement that we can never truly understand what we are listening for” (24). In keeping with this ethos, though the poem directs readers to listen as an intrinsic good and goes so far as to devote the “fourth Act [to] a staging of the act of listening itself … the poem doesn’t tell us what to listen *for*”(25, author’s emphasis). Instead, and in light of its prescription to listen, *Prometheus Unbound* scripts for its readers yet another unpredictable scene, a scene to be played out beyond the pages of the poem: “confronted by the nothingness of sound from which meaning can or might or might not come, we are nonetheless compelled to speak again” (25).

Offering the collection’s closing argument, Gabriel Stephen Trop surveys significant works of German Romanticism to discuss how within this body of literature sounding objects figure “a metaphysical drama in acoustic form” (2). Beginning with the examples of the clock and the wind that famously open Novalis' novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802), Trop insists that readers not “reduce [such] objects, in traditional terms, to the function of setting—to background conditions against which an event takes place” (2). Instead, Trop argues, “they indicate tensions in the dynamic from which entities emerge, the domain the Romantics and post-Kantian philosophers called the *unconditioned* (*das Unbedingte*): the absolute as that to which no conditions can be attached” (2). As Trop notes, whereas “the window is typically a privileged speculative site, the opening onto a space at once visual and visionary, in Novalis “the first sensory organ to register the drama of the unconditioned in this instance is the ear” (2). The essay finds that within various works of German Romanticism “it is not just that sound indicates the absolute as that which is unconditioned, but that it constructs the real as a material-ideal system in the process of turning against itself, moving amidst the peaks and troughs of waves, perpetually unconditioning itself and carrying all beings along in its wake” (33). In this sense, then, a larger implication of Trop’s project is that sound carries us all in its wake.

Across an ambitious yet careful analysis of sound in key works of German Romanticism, Trop emphasizes how such texts articulate “the irreducible gap between real and ideal as the basis for a diabolic and extra-normative generativity” (3). Trop engages with not just Novalis’ novel but also his “scientific and philosophical fragments,” Shelling’s take on “sonority” from the *Philosophy of Music*, Ørsted’s discussions of “sound as shock,” Ritter’s conception of sound “as an electrical virtuality of figuration,” Eichendorff’s “lyrical equation of contemplation with intoxication through the concept of rustling, *Rauschen,*”as well as E. T. A. Hoffmann’s “electrical-musical aesthetics” (3). In these respective treatments of sound each work testifies to how “Material vibrations, waves, oscillations, collisions—all taking place below the threshold of conscious perception—can be amplified in Romantic thought into larger-scale domains: from language to the soul, from acoustics to physiology, from wave oscillations to the modification of human sensuous capacities” (2). The essay uncovers how “sound discloses fundamental ontology as an oscillation of the real, the real *as* oscillation: a trembling of things that moves through all individuated forms, material and spiritual” (33). Trop grapples with how “the most intimate experiences of the world become the most alien” as the German Romantics he studies undertake “their speculative philosophical and aesthetic experiments with sound” (33). By these lights “we see that it is not sufficient for the German Romantics to describe sound and its material or ideal basis; rather, the latent dynamics emergent from the speculative and aesthetic encounter with sound must be redirected back into the world: as an art of unconditioning” (33).

To round out the introduction by voicing one of the volume’s largest implications that might otherwise go unsung, I’ll turn once again to Sterne’s field-defining work on sound studies from *The Audible Past*. There Sterne makes quick work of dispelling a persistent myth: that the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, and radio irrevocably altered “the nature, meaning, and practices of sound in the late nineteenth century” (1). Sterne calls out seductive narratives such as these for being “incomplete” given that “[m]any of the practices, ideas, and constructs associated with sound-reproduction technologies predated the machines themselves” (1). Extending Sterne’s thinking, I offer the lines of Romantic literature studied here and elsewhere as a valuable record of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century soundways. Romanticism’s literary records predate the likes of the telegraph or the radio and so comprise a sound-reproducing technology bearing sonic cultures and sonic histories and sonic theories. These are cultures, histories, and theories that are at risk of going unheard if we were to fail to take the time now to turn their pages, to tune in, and listen to them.

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