Unquiet Romanticism

In the early lines of “Frost at Midnight,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s speaker asks the reader to listen with him. His brief description of “the owlet’s cry” which “came loud”[[1]](#footnote-1) at some unspecified point anterior to the listening moment is interrupted by the cry itself: “—and hark, again! loud as before.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (3). However, while its interruptive presence primes the reader to attend to sound, it is not this piercing cry which dominates the first stanza; instead, our attention is turned to the quietness it throws into relief. The speaker registers the strangeness of the evening’s “extreme silentness”[[3]](#footnote-3) against the momentarily imperceptible din of “all the numberless goings on of life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Yet the silence in the cottage is not emptiness. The speaker self-consciously implies that those sounding things and bodies must still be somewhere stirring airwaves even while his human ear finds them “Inaudible as dreams.”[[5]](#footnote-5) What’s more, their ‘vexing’ inaudibility seems to prompt him to listen more closely into the silence for signs of life nearby. He soon entrains himself to “the sole unquiet thing,” the “film” that “still flutters” on the grate.[[6]](#footnote-6) Whether the speaker actually *hears* the film’s flutters is indeterminate at best, but the possibility that its unquietness has not only to do with visible motion but with motion-as-soundwaves is extremely suggestive. Faced with what he otherwise perceives as a calm so profound that it “disturbs / And vexes meditation,”[[7]](#footnote-7) the speaker becomes attuned multisensorially[[8]](#footnote-8) to the one thing disturbing the silence. Coleridge seems to acknowledge that absolute silence (and, as such, absolute individual seclusion) is an impossibility; as long as the subject is situated in a world with energy and other bodies, the air will always be filled with sound vibration and there will always be some noise.

This essay posits an ‘unquiet’ Romanticism. I examine a category of sonic moments in Romantic poetry in which the limits of audition are stretched to acknowledge not only what and how we hear but also the significance of sounds so low-decibel as to render the idea that they could be audible almost absurd. The unlikeliness that Coleridge actually means the event of his perception of the film to be a clear case of audition, strictly speaking, is precisely why I have chosen to begin this essay with the example of “Frost at Midnight,” which I would hazard to call a less obviously sonic poem than many I could have chosen. Dwelling on the film’s flutter as a sonic event accomplishes a few things that are central to this essay: 1. It foregrounds sound’s radical materiality as a concept I argue was more ubiquitous in the Romantic intellectual milieu than has tended to be acknowledged, 2. It explores the specific affordances of ‘unquiet’ noise as a generative category of sound, and 3. It toggles between sensory experience and the disembodied imagination, and therefore gets at quintessentially Romantic questions surrounding phenomenal experience and the creative subject.

Though in general Romanticism is thick with sounds[[9]](#footnote-9) and certainly not short on noises that fit this category, I will limit my reading here to a few prime examples of ‘quiet’ things made ‘unquiet’ in poetry of the period. In each case, the Romantic power of the imagination is made resonant with material sound objects that elude its absolute grasp. These sounds often emerge into the field of hearing such that they seem always to have been there awaiting perception, their temporal and spatial indeterminacy contributing an abstract type of vastness and raising questions about perception, receptivity, and attention, as the listener oscillates between agential attunement and induced receptivity. In these passages, expansive movements of the mind prompted by even the gentlest sonic vibrations blur the lines between pleasure and fearful awe, and between imaginative empowerment and vulnerability. They likewise expand the boundaries of aesthetic categories of sublimity and beauty to encompass qualities of disorganization not traditionally regarded as properly aesthetic at all. Such ‘unquiet’ sounds draw attention to a material understanding of acoustics that would become increasingly popularized throughout the nineteenth century. They represent silence and quietness as sensorially potent and listening as an emphatically embodied perceptive mode which nonetheless involves the imagination in a process of knowledge production centered on self-conscious subjectivity. As sound theorist Salome Voegelin writes, “Sound narrates, outlines and fills, but it is always ephemeral and doubtful. Between my heard and the sonic object/phenomenon I will never know its truth but can only invent it, producing a knowing for me.[[10]](#footnote-10) In Jean-Luc Nancy’s articulation, “To be listening will always…be to be straining toward or in an approach to the self.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Thinking with Voegelin and Nancy, I suggest 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. In their approaches to quietly noisy sounds that refuse absolute epistemological or symbolic stability, the examples I explore thus suggest a gray area between a solitary Romantic subjectivity dependent on the strength of the autonomous imagination and a (just as fundamentally Romantic) sensorially contingent conception of self.

Very often, when we talk about noise, it is in the context of industrial capitalism’s destructive force. R. Murray Schafer’s *The Soundscape* (initially published in 1977),[[12]](#footnote-12) a foundational text for the field of sound studies, centers on modernity’s transition from a pre-industrial “hi-fi” soundscape to a “lo-fi” soundscape in which individual sounds are more difficult to distinguish from a higher density of ambient sound. Schafer focuses on environmental and humanist concern for how our ability to gather information (and, indeed, pleasure) from our acoustic environment has degraded with the proliferation of noise pollution. The discourse surrounding silence and noise to which I wish to attend, however, concerns itself with an awareness that true, absolute silence has never existed. It explores noise not as a one-dimensionally overwhelming, distracting or painful thing, but rather as an ambiguous, sometimes baffling, and sometimes imaginatively provocative presence.

Coleridge’s fluttering film, the residue of a coal fire, encodes a relationship to industry and an associated atmosphere of urban loudness, so that the “numberless goings on of life / Inaudible as dreams,” and consequently contexts of social, economic, and political life,[[13]](#footnote-13) are sounded in the lyric description cottage’s un-silent quietness. But it is also invoked in the poem in the context of nostalgia and anticipation made possible by an active imagination. Coleridge progresses from the memory of his own disappointed childhood longings brought forth by his fixation on the stranger to a projected vision of a future in which his son, whose “gentle breathings, heard in this deep calm” eventually replace the flutter as the dominant noise in his ear and “Fill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought,”[[14]](#footnote-14) will live amongst the gently nurturing noises of the country’s quietude. The poem therefore acknowledges coexisting but contradictory relationships with noise; it can be fraught, overpowering, painful, or destructive, but it can also be beguiling, compelling, calming, or imaginatively animating.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Coleridge approaches what might seem like silence as instead a thicker atmosphere that is populated by the film’s flutter. In this way, he anticipates John Cage’s famous refutation of silence as emptiness. In 1937, Cage began the lecture that would eventually become the “credo” on “the future of music” at the front of essays collected under the title *Silence* (1961) with a now-famous statement of sonic reality: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating…We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments.[[16]](#footnote-16) Cage implies that, in literal terms, true silence is an impossibility. In the field of sound studies, Cage’s words have been taken up time and again in efforts at grappling with the awareness that sound must be a constant presence with which we interact, whether we attend to it or not. They have also been used to unravel the concept of noise as a stable or objectively classifiable sub-category of sound. Cage’s emphasis on how attention to noise can shift it from a ‘disturbance’ to an object of fascination foregrounds subjectivity in listening, whereas many theorizations of noise center on the social by examining how it can only be defined aesthetically in comparison with other sounds on the basis of culturally dictated ideals of aesthetic value.[[17]](#footnote-17) As such, we might see noise as affording a great deal of imaginative flexibility as well as cultural potency. I wish to suggest that this ongoing interrogation of how we define noise can be enriched by a consideration of how pre-phonograph literary writing (and Romantic lyric poetry in particular) might be approached as a kind of sound recording technology that necessarily emphasizes what Michel Chion calls the ‘auditum,’ sound as heard.[[18]](#footnote-18) Romantic writers approached noise as ontologically and aesthetically ambiguous material, drawing on contemporaneous theories of acoustic science but ultimately surpassing them to explore its vibrational force and the ways in which listening to noise could constitute a relationship to self and to the world.

Literary scholarship has begun to question what it might mean to regard sound as more primary to the Romantic imagination than has previously been acknowledged;[[19]](#footnote-19) I consider how poetic representations of noises offering a hushed counterpoint to the thunderous sublime—sounds that treads a line between audible and not—might help us to rethink the relationships between Romantic representations of listening, early information about acoustic physics, and theorizations of noise and silence that followed. While the “unquiet” noises that interest me appear across vastly different poetic settings, I hope to explore consistencies in their understanding of noise—and, adjacently, the aesthetic qualities of a sound—as a concept rooted in the self-reflexive experience of listening. To do so is to understand the Romantic imagination to have been interested not only in the implications of living with and contributing to an increasingly noisy world, but also in how sounds so 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.

Coleridge’s fluttering film can be called noise precisely because of how the speaker reflects on his perception of it. Calling the film “unquiet” does not explicitly identify its motion as audible, but at the same time it does not exclude its erratic oscillations from noise as a class of sonic vibrations. If we are meant to understand that the speaker hears the film’s flutter, it is because the absence of louder noises allows for a heightened awareness of small ones.[[20]](#footnote-20) If not, the movement of the film is nonetheless registered as a movement of the air with a profound capacity to engage the speaker’s mind. Tiny and questionably audible as it is, the flutter is made sonorous.

Contemplating the film once it becomes present to his notice, the speaker begins to self-consciously examine the reasons behind its emergent significance:

Methinks, its motion in this hush of nature

Gives it dim sympathies with me who live,

Making it a companionable form,

Whose puny flaps and freaks the idling Spirit

By its own moods interprets, every where

Echo or mirror seeking of itself,

And makes a toy of Thought.[[21]](#footnote-21)

In part because the fluttering stranger’s material motion is so dramatically weak,[[22]](#footnote-22) criticism often regards the poetic mind is as the primary animating force behind it and the film itself as an object of frustrated anticipation in Coleridge’s memory. Its motion is therefore often aligned more closely with the ‘vexing’ silence than with Hartley’s breath, which is typically read as a source of imaginative rejuvenation and hopeful projection.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rather than reading Coleridge’s intellectual or social restlessness as the primary animating force behind the film’s liveliness, I am interested in considering how a sonic reading of the film might help us to regard its material activity as mentally provoking, without exaggerating the volume of its force. In exploring apparent silence as inclusive of ‘unquiet’ noise which is imaginatively stimulating, I follow from Nancy Yousef’s reading of “Frost and Midnight.” Yousef frames the poem as exploring a “generative silence”[[24]](#footnote-24)initially in the presence of the fluttering ‘stranger’ and in what she identifies as its echo in the speaker’s image of his child “fluttering” in his mother’s arms in the 1798 version of the poem. For Yousef, the “lyric meditation”[[25]](#footnote-25) Coleridge explores in the poem arises from a particular kind of Romantic intimacy resting on the presence, without distraction, of an other. I wish to cast sonic materiality as a constitutive dimension of the conditions of meditation she describes. Yousef writes:

What is marked as extraordinary here is precisely not silence as opposed to sound but *this* silence as compared to other, more familiar, less intense experiences of silence. But what constitutes this estranging excess? What is so disquieting in this midnight calm? Thought is neither arrested nor agitated in the lines that follow. On the contrary, the self-conscious, alert but by no means anxious, reflections inspired by the film fluttering on the grate, ‘making it a companionable form,’ seem to follow the mind at play.[[26]](#footnote-26)

One answer to the question above might be Coleridge’s awareness in this moment that the silence in the cottage is thick with inaudible sound. Reading the film’s flutter sonically complicates the idea that the speaker simply projects his own liveliness onto an inanimate object. If on a molecular level, sounds, as vibrations, move us whether we hear them or not, Coleridge’s attunement to the flutter might not be ‘animating’ so much as attentive to how even the smallest sonic encounters engage us in a self-reflexive and materially reciprocal relationship with the world and others around us. Coleridge’s imagined ‘sympathy’ with the film upon attuning to its flutter gestures toward vibrational reciprocity, something that sound studies theorists argue makes sonic perception unique.[[27]](#footnote-27)

That sound vibration is material, and that we encounter it in embodied modes in excess of the tones we can perceive aurally, was a fact of increasing interest during the Romantic period. Late-eighteenth-century investigations of the physiological and cognitive significance of vibration as a more general phenomenon—most notably David Hartley’s theory of vibratory associationism*—*have been well-canvassed, but I would like to draw out some important adjacent theories of acoustics that circulated during the late-eighteenth century and became increasingly popular during the nineteenth century.[[28]](#footnote-28) Ersnt Chladni,[[29]](#footnote-29) best known for his three-dimensional spatial visualizations of sound waves through experimentation with sand on vibrating plates in order to produce the diagrams of sound vibration (‘Chladni figures’) initially published in *Entdeckungen über die Theorie des Klanges* (*Discoveries in the Theory of Sound*) (1787), developed a strikingly mechanical model of the hearing ear. Where Chladni’s theory of audition bears the most significant resemblance to Hartley’s associationist model of brain function,[[30]](#footnote-30) however, is in his explanation of the transmission of sound vibrations through liquid- and air-filled cavities of the ear in his later monograph, *Die Akustik* (1802)[[31]](#footnote-31)*,* or *Treatise on Acoustics*:

The vibration of the air agitated by the sounding body disturbs the eardrum. This moves the small bones in the cavity, which act on one another as levers. The base of the stirrup imprints these vibrations on the gelatinous fluid that fills the whole labyrinth, by means of the oval window. The vibrations of the eardrum also disturb the air contained in the cavity, which transmits these impulses to the round window, so that the impression is handled in two ways at the same time. The auditory nerve, the substance of which is widespread in the whole labyrinth, transmits these impressions to the brain, as the common center of all sensation.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Chladni’s emphasis on the final transmission of vibration to the brain isolates hearing as a unique sense, but he is also careful to frame multisensory embodiment as a necessary premise for audition and, indeed, for cognition.

Where Chladni hit an epistemological impasse, and where I argue poetically rendered ‘unquiet’ sounds in Romanticism explore productive ambiguities, was in noise. Chladni began to identify how a tone behaves as both a discrete external entity and a psychophysiological phenomenon, beginning his monograph by drawing a definitional line between sound and noise: “A sufficiently rapid vibratory motion that is strong enough to affect the hearing organ is a *sound*. If the vibrations of a sounding body are distinguishable, both in their frequency and in their change in shape, they are called *distinct sound* or *sound* properly called, in order to distinguish them from *noise*, or indistinguishable vibrations.”[[33]](#footnote-33) While Chladni notes that noise necessarily accompanies those tones we *can* distinguish, and even vaguely anticipates Herman von Helmholtz’s enormously influential mid-nineteenth-century work on partial overtones by suggesting that additional frequencies contribute to the timbre of sound in music,[[34]](#footnote-34) it is clear that at the turn of the nineteenth century, the new field of acoustic physics was not yet ready to confront noise mathematically. He effectively throws his hands up, writing, “In distinct sound, the vibrations of a sounding body or of its parts are carried out at the same time, and all the vibrations are of equal duration; but one cannot say the same thing about noise, the nature of which is still not known.”[[35]](#footnote-35) In doing so, he gestures toward some of the epistemological problems facing acoustic scientists at the time as well as (more obliquely) the ontological challenges inherent in an understanding that every body inhabits a reciprocal relationship with the vibrating world of noise.

Edmund Burke uses similar language to Chladni’s in his description of a sonic sublimity dependent the cumulative effect of a repeated “simple sound” causing the ear “to be struck by a single pulse of the air, which makes the ear-drum and the other membranous parts vibrate.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Repetition, he argues, creates anticipatory “tension” and eventually inspires what he calls “the artificial infinite”—if, and only if, the vibration is periodically consistent. Burke explicitly describes the *physical* phenomenon of hearing in terms of vibration[[37]](#footnote-37) in order to explain this effect: “When the ear receives any simple sound, it is struck by a single pulse in the air, which makes the ear-drum and the other membranous parts vibrate according to the nature and species of the stroke.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Burke’s near complete exclusion of music or sound in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* has arguably contributed to a persistent understanding of the aesthetic imagination in the period as prioritizing the visual, but he does notably cite the sublime potential of natural and human cacophonies[[39]](#footnote-39) in a short section on the topic of “Sound and Loudness”:

The noise of vast cataracts, raging storms, thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and aweful sensation in the mind, though we can observe no nicety or artifice in those sorts of music. The shouting of multitudes has a similar effect; and by the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that in this staggering, and hurry of the mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being born down, and joining in the common cry...[[40]](#footnote-40)

Apart from sheer force of volume, then, disorganized noise has no place in Burke’s aesthetics.

What Burke and Chladni dismiss as neither epistemologically nor aesthetically stable is precisely what I refer to when I discuss “unquiet” noises in Romantic poetry. Rather than coming to an intellectual dead end in the face of noise, however, I argue that Romantic poets explored how the imagination might participate in the perception of both beauty and sublimity in quiet noise. In “Frost at Midnight,” to return to Coleridge, ‘indistinguishable’ sound is imbued with experiential and psychological significance. Coleridge emphasizes the flutter’s extreme quietness and frames it, as an event in the space of the cottage, as atmospherically insignificant apart from the speaker’s attunement to it, which makes it an object of absorbing meditation. In this way, he models Voegelin’s definition of noise as a participatory event between the mind and an external vibration: “Noise,” she writes, “does not have to be loud, but it has to be exclusive…This can be achieved through tiny sounds that grab my ear and make my listening obsessive and exclusive…Sound is noisy when it deafens my ears to anything but itself.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Thus Coleridge’s loud, piercing, unquestionably audible owlet’s cry and the ambiguous audibility of the fluttering film might both be approached as noise in the poem on the basis of the speaker’s focused attunement to them. Coleridge shows attention to be grabbed, but then also directed toward the ‘unquiet’ noise object. He demonstrates how willed attunement can shift a sound from an unwelcome irritation to a familiar friend, a shift upon which Zadie Smith reflects in her essay on attunement. She recounts having hummed a tune that was newly resonating with her in the “vast silence of a valley” at Tintern Abbey and describes the complex affinity she felt for it, “not yet conscious of the transformation she had undergone” as it became something significant to her memory and her conception of self.[[42]](#footnote-42) Coleridge similarly drifts into resonance with the film’s flutter. While the owlet’s loudness initially compels his attention, the film on the grate almost resists it until it takes on outsize importance, initiating the first major movement of the mind in the poem when the speaker is swept back to his schoolboy days and the longing he felt then for his

sweet birth-place, and the old church-tower,

Whose bells, the poor man's only music, rang

From morn to evening, all the hot Fair-day,

So sweetly, that they stirred and haunted me

With a wild pleasure, falling on mine ear

Most like articulate sounds of things to come![[43]](#footnote-43)

Once he attunes to it, the film is made resonant in the poem. Its softly noisy movement is rendered in the onomatopoeic quality of its description and mingles with the remembered “music” of bells, themselves meaningful both in general aesthetic terms for their deliberate, tuned harmonies, but in this case also for the “wild pleasure” they had inspired. The poem enacts what Nina Sun Eidsheim calls a “vibrational practice,” which she writes “relates a sound not to an a priori definition but to transmission.”[[44]](#footnote-44) The ‘transmission’ of vibrational energy between the film and the speaker activates memory, imagination, and aesthetic pleasure. Eidsheim’s is a corrective approach to the musical aesthetics Chladni and Helmholtz strove to explain mathematically, calling for a transition “from thinking about music as a knowable aesthetic object to thinking about it as transferrable energy. *Transferable energy* here denotes energy pulsating through and across material and transforming as it adapts to and takes on various material qualities; it is at the crux of thinking about music in the dimensions of transmission and vibrational realizations in material-specific and dynamic contexts.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Eidsheim’s vibrational practice is fundamentally active entrainment. I argue that understanding such a practice to lie at the basis of listening may help us to think through Romanticism’s consistent conflation of the concepts of music and noise, particularly in the cases I have pointed out, where noise is not loud, but instead a gentle chaos of vibrations and more likely to be approached as ‘sweet’ or musical.[[46]](#footnote-46) The evident “nonfixity” of these noises invites imaginative attention, but it also makes them elusive to it, tempting evocative verbal emphasis on their intriguing material qualities and suggesting an opportunity for imaginative projection that appeals to a Romantic interest in the creative power of a poetic mind. As such, appreciating them as creatively and cognitively provocative requires specific kinds of active imaginative openness.

For Voegelin and for Coleridge, ‘noise’ has less to do with measurable properties of a sound as a material object than it does with attention and the behavior of the mind in perceiving it. To be engaged by noise is to be complicit in giving oneself up to an embodied sonic experience rather than to practice the “apprehending listening” dictated by musical aesthetic philosophies organized around identifiable tones.[[47]](#footnote-47) Another way to put this might be to say that entering a frame of mind in which noise is imaginatively provocative is a form of Keats’s negative capability, “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Of course, Keats goes on to criticize Coleridge for an incapability of achieving such a frame of mind. But in a reading of “Frost at Midnight” emphasizing the speaker’s willingness to follow the movements of thought and indeterminate anticipations prompted by his attunement to such an uncertain signal as the unquiet film, might we not see evidence of such a capacity?

Because the noises I am classing as “unquiet” in Romanticism are not immediately legible in terms of aesthetic quality or meaning—personal, natural, social, or otherwise—they draw the mind of the hearer out to become an actively engaged listener involved in encountering them as aesthetic objects rather than simply material phenomena. As such, they enfold a distinctly Romantic interest in how the creative imagination extends itself into the sensuously stimulating world. As the Coleridge example I have been revisiting emphasizes, these are very often persistent sounds. Their low volume, and in some cases their lack of characteristic or distinguishing tones, means that they can sometimes waft through the air undetected, reaching the ears without alerting the mind. Once the listener seeks them out or they ‘grab the ears,’ to borrow terminology from Voegelin, however, ‘unquiet’ noises tend to re-echo in imaginative memory. It is in that mental amplification that they take on greater resonance, though very often this is a ‘silent’ process. The meditative mood that follows Coleridge’s attention to the fluttering film, for example, bears similarity to Wordsworth’s speaker listening to the “homeless voice of waters” rising through the “breach” in “vapour” atop Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude,*[[49]](#footnote-49)and Percy Shelley’s contemplation of the “unresting sound”[[50]](#footnote-50) of the Arve which at the end of “Mont Blanc” is enveloped with the rest of the “still and solemn power of the many sights, / And many sounds, and much of life and death”[[51]](#footnote-51) in the mountain’s distant “silence.”[[52]](#footnote-52) While each of these examples is vastly different from the others in many ways, each features a sublime imaginative expansion in the mind’s striving effort of listening for or to noises that I would call ‘unquiet,’ whose power lies not in their volume, but in their indeterminacy. Rather than focusing on the heard sound object per se, these passages focus instead what Eidsheim above calls “transferable energy,” which is to be located *both* within the heard noise itself and in the listener’s internalization of some impression of the acoustic encounter. They call to mind Jean-Luc Nancy’s description of the difference between hearing and listening: “If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Listening, then, does involve the subject to relinquish a certain degree of intellectual control. For Nancy, in fact, truly “immersed” listening, “with all [one’s] being”[[54]](#footnote-54) for the “the sound that is musically listened to, that is gathered and scrutinized for itself…as a resonant meaning, a meaning whose *sense* is supposed to be found in resonance and only in resonance” places one “always on the edge of meaning.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley each place their listening subjects into such an immersed, striving mode, but they do so without fully abandoning imaginative autonomy.

To be “on the edge of meaning” is a state that Wordsworth in particular explores through his representations of listening. Sound, more often than not the sound of various waters, runs as a current throughout *The Prelude*, often in relation the poet-speaker’s striving desire to feel fellowship with a creative force in nature and to reciprocally meet its voices with his own. I would like to focus my attention on two instances of especially chaotic but not necessarily loud Wordsworthian noise. The first is the “voice / Of mountain torrents”[[56]](#footnote-56) in “There was a boy,” and the second is the similarly distant “homeless voice of waters”[[57]](#footnote-57) Wordsworth recounts hearing from from atop Mount Snowdon.

As in “Frost at Midnight,” the noise in question in “There was a boy” is preceded by undeniably loud owls. The boy stands calling out to the birds, confident that his mimicry will be rewarded with a response. At first, Wordsworth confirms the boy’s conceit: In return to the boy’s calls the owls

would shout

Across the wat’ry vale, and shout again,

Responsive to his call, with quivering peals

And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud,

Redoubled and redoubled—concourse wild

Of mirth and jocund din.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The disorderly tumult of disembodied voices emanates from the trees reverberates. Yet this is not what leaves an impression on the boy. That kind of deeply affecting power emanates instead from the distant noise of waters:

And when it chanced

That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,

Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung

Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize

Has carried far into his heart the voice

Of mountain torrents…[[59]](#footnote-59)

It is important to note that the boy’s ability to hear the torrents depends on his own silence, but also that his listening is only “sometimes” met with the affecting shock of the watery “voice”; ultimately, neither natural sound can be unequivocally commanded. As Michele Speitz has pointed out, “sound simply cannot be possessed for the Wordsworthian human subject; sound can be felt and felt again but only to be lost and lost again”[[60]](#footnote-60) In order to hear the torrents, the boy must shift from his assumed position of power over nature and its voices to a more open reciprocal state, responding to nature’s sonic refusal of his control by silently listening for whatever sounds might reach him.[[61]](#footnote-61) Following Geoffrey Hartman’s reading, the abrupt shift from the boy’s listening pause to information of his early death has often been read as an example of traumatic incompletion,[[62]](#footnote-62) but dwelling on the metrically accentuated pause in “Listening,” the moment of audition in which the poem freezes him is nonetheless one of expansive affective and cognitive depth.

Wordsworth’s encounter with distant torrents from the slopes of Mount Snowdon later in *The Prelude* finds similar depth in noise. After the poet-speaker and his trailing companions emerge into moonlight in a “flash of light,” he describes a standing before a “huge sea of mist”:[[63]](#footnote-63)

…we stood, the mist

Touching our very feet; and from the shore

At a distance not the third part of a mile

Was a blue chasm, a fracture in the vapours,

A deep and gloomy breathing-place, through which

Mounted the roar of water, torrents, streams

Innumerable, roaring with one voice.

The universal spectacle throughout

Was shaped for admiration and delight,

Grand in itself alone, but in that breach

Through which the homeless voice of waters rose,

That dark deep thoroughfare, had Nature lodged

The soul, the imagination of the whole.[[64]](#footnote-64)

The chasm’s visual void contrasts with the flash of light at the beginning of the passage, but it is filled with sound which in a way draws Wordsworth by the ear back into the mist out of which, as Emily Rohrbach reminds us, he had emerged into the light. A simplified reading might find a metaphorical refutation of enlightenment as a paradigmatically visual concept; not in the visual vista, but in the indistinguishably mingled, endlessly radiating vibrations of the water’s sound does Wordsworth locate “The soul, the imagination of the whole.” At the very least, Wordsworth’s shift from viewer to listener is generatively humbling. In his description of the waters’ mingled “voice,” the verse gives way to chaotically sonic language, evoking the uncommunicable quality of the sound’s ‘roaring’ power. And yet, for all its sublimity, the volume of the sound is ambiguous. It fills the air and verse once noticed, but before then the passage feels utterly silent. Whether the noise of the real torrents Wordsworth heard was actually loud seems irrelevant; in the poem, it is powerfully unquiet.

Wordsworth reflects on the lingering impression of the scene atop Snowdon in one his most forceful statements of imaginative power. As he remains on the “lonely mountain,”[[65]](#footnote-65) deprived of sight by night, he meditates on the ability to “build up greatest things / From least suggestion”[[66]](#footnote-66) in those with such power of mind that

in a world of life they live,

By sensible impressions not enthralled,

But quickened, roused, and made thereby more fit

To hold communion with the invisible world.[[67]](#footnote-67)

Some of nature’s sublime sounds, Wordsworth asserts, “even the grossest minds must see and hear, / And cannot chuse but feel,”[[68]](#footnote-68) but to find resonance in less imposing ones requires the creative power of a poetic mind which listens for them but also abides with some of their uncertainty.

To a certain extent, Percy Shelley’s address to another mountain at the close of “Mont Blanc” recalls Wordsworth’s contemplation of the “perfect image of a mighty mind”[[69]](#footnote-69) in the wake of his encounter with the torrents’ sonic sublimity made quiet by distance. Sound in “Mont Blanc” is emphatically material.[[70]](#footnote-70) Shelley insists not only on the ‘ceaselessness’ of the noise, but also on the way in which it travels through its environment. In his multisensorial evocation of the ravine, he conceives of a physical and metaphysical acoustics which later underlies the thick silence of the poem’s close. Within such an acoustics is layered not only the noise of such a powerfully loud place, but the image of human thoughts traveling outward as well:

…from secret springs

The source of human thought its tribute brings

Of waters,—with a sound but half its own,

Such as a feeble brook will oft assume

In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,

Where waterfalls around it leap for ever,

Where woods and winds content, and a vast river

Over its rocks ceaselessly burst and raves.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Shelley’s poetic attention to his imagined brook’s “sound but half its own” as a material correlative to “human thought” emphasizes how its noise is not cancelled out, but made resonant with louder sounds. I understand such a co-amplification to follow from Anne McCarthy’s reading of “a sublime aesthetics of contingency in “Mont Blanc” that does not seek to escape the discontinuities and confusions of the material world through an identification with infinite reason.”[[72]](#footnote-72) “Shelley,” McCarthy argues, “renders a sublime that consists in the power to suspend the distinction between the dominant and the dominated.”[[73]](#footnote-73) And so, confronted with the loud sublimity of the Ravine of Arve, the poetic imagination and its “legion of wild thoughts”[[74]](#footnote-74) which Shelley projects as though physically floating through the air neither quiets nor is completely quieted by the thunderous sounds that have materially moved him.

Like Wordsworth’s lingering contemplation of the “roar of waters” heard at a distance from atop Mount Snowdon, the resonance of the mountain’s noisy vibrations in a mind that strives, listening ‘on the edge meaning,’ fills the silence of “Mont Blanc’s” close. In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker zooms out, and the sensorial chaos of the poem dwindles. The close of the poem reaches a contemplative quiet which is nonetheless ‘unquiet’ in an address to the mountaintop’s serene aspect:

…Winds contend

Silently there, and heap the snow with breath

Rapid and strong, but silently! Its home

The voiceless lightning in these solitudes

Keeps innocently, and like vapour broods

Over the snow. The secret strength of things

Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome

Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,

If to the human mind’s imaginings

Silence and solitude were vacancy?[[75]](#footnote-75)

The human mind and the power of nature are less tumultuously intertwined here than in the earlier stanzas, acknowledging the literal distance between body and mountain, so that the mind’s “unremitting interchange / With the clear universe of things around”[[76]](#footnote-76) might seem to have been cut off by the shift away from the sensorially immersive sublimity Shelley had previously evoked. And yet, the sound of the lines, a softly winding dominance of sibilants mimicking the whistling winds we would expect to hear at Mont Blanc’s heights, achieves an effect that is calmed but still unquiet. “Mont Blanc,” like the other examples I have considered, contemplates a tension between what we can hear, what we cannot, and how an imagination attuned to noise fills the space of what only seems like silence, without overpowering the auditory body’s sense of situatedness within it.

I would like to close with a brief reflection on our own ‘unquiet’ moment. I happened to finish drafting this essay during the world’s most hushed period in recent history, as lockdown measures responding to the novel coronavirus pandemic slowed the industrial and social activities that normally constitute the racket of humanity. Apart from the frequent, piercing sound of sirens, Brooklyn, NY was eerily quiet—to the point that it ‘vexed meditation,’ to borrow from Coleridge. But in late spring, 2020, public attention began to attend to certain unquiet sounds in a proliferation of news about how some things had become unusually audible amidst the ‘extreme silentness.’ One *New York Times* piece offered an audio guide highlighting birdsong that would normally be out of earshot: “The birds have always been here,” the guide observed; “This spring, we can hear them.”[[77]](#footnote-77) Such encouragement to take advantage of a restored hi-fi soundscape seemed desperately grateful for the smallest glimmers of beauty we could find in our defamiliarized local atmospheres. But more than that, it was implicitly introspective and forward-looking. It seemed to suggest not only that attuning to small sounds might offer some psychological respite, but as well that this was an opportunity for us to reintroduce ourselves our ambient soundscape and to consider afresh how our noise impacts the environment. In late July, scientists reported that seismic reverberation of “anthropogenic noise” had diminished to such a degree that we are in “the longest and most coherent global seismic noise reduction in recorded history.”[[78]](#footnote-78) As a result, seismometers have been able to detect previous drowned-out signals, gathering information could have a positive impact on studies using seismic data to analyze collective human behavior and to volcanic activity.[[79]](#footnote-79) This newly invigorated attention to sonic activity is a divergence from typical recent meditations on noise, which have often involved anthropocentric anxiety. A fascinating 2019 essay in *The Atlantic*, for example, detailed how a low hum pervading an Arizona man’s suburban home and its vicinity had slowly come to his attention and eventually agonized him to such an extent that he felt subject to (in his terms) ‘an acoustic attack.’[[80]](#footnote-80) The essay alternates between accounting for the rising din of late capitalist noise pollution and contemplating the psychology behind habits of aural fixation. The noise turned out to be the sound of chiller units maintaining data center equipment, droning at a frequency that happens to be especially irritating to human ears but which nonetheless is projected at decibels low enough that activists had a difficult time fighting for intervention. Though it possibly supported any number of creatively generative endeavors online, the hum drove many of the people living nearby out of their minds with distraction. Bosker’s piece was of course published online, its print title offering a dramatic assessment of the environmental fate it thus did its small part to ensure: “The End of Silence.”

An “end of silence” is precisely what I would argue Romantic writers knew had always already come to pass. Stretching the boundaries of their contemporary aesthetic categories, Romantic literary representations of listening present noise as an underpinning of phenomenological experience and audition as an essential (sometimes involuntary) activity through which human subjects enter into self-reflexive reciprocity with elements of their social and natural worlds. This, they show us, offers both sensorial and creative richness, but it comes with inherent vulnerabilities as well. The Romantics could not have imagined the particular noisiness of the world we live in now, but they did presciently consider the significance of sound’s constant vibrational presence and how faint unquiet noises lie undetected until we notice them. Now, in our own tumultuous moment, we too are finding new ways of listening, “on the edge of meaning,” perhaps, ourselves.

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1. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., line 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., line 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., line 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., line 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., lines 15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., lines 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Romantic audition almost never occurs in complete isolation from the other senses, and it is very often paired with sight (particularly in Wordsworth). In instances in which the senses are more emphatically intertwined without being conflated with one another (as in synaesthesia), I find the term ‘multisensorial’ to effectively suggest a heightened awareness of multiple dimensions of embodied sensation. Nina Sun Eidsheim asserts that sound transmission is necessarily multisensorial, and argues that to think of it as such is necessary in order to “redirect thinking about sound as object…toward a reconception of sound as event” (Nina Sun Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound: Singing & Listening as Vibrational Practice*, Sign, Storage, Transmission (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 3. My aim here is to show how a Romantic poetics of ‘unquiet’ noise works in that direction by emphasizing the play between attention, perception, and subjective response to such sounding vibrations. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Susan Wolfson’s essay in the 2008 *Romantic Circles: Praxis* volume on sound shows us just how variegated an array of Romantic sounds we might place together. Like many others, Wolfson places particular emphasis on William Wordsworth’s ear, but she also highlights Coleridge’s deep interest in sound. See Susan J. Wolfson, “Sounding Romantic: The Sound of Sound,” in *95240*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson, Romantic Circles Praxis Series: Apr (College Park, MD: University of Maryland Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-35973-1\_795. By starting with such a quiet moment in Coleridge, I hope to search beneath the sounds that tend to catch our attention in order to understand Romantic writing as more sonically rich than we have tended to appreciate. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, 1st ed (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vt. : [United States]: Destiny Books ; Distributed to the book trade in the United States by American International Distribution Corp, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It is noteworthy as well that William Wordsworth uses “unquiet sounds” in *The Prelude* (1805) to characterize the reach of the French Revolution’s strife into domestic spaces. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Charles Gill, 1st ed, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Coleridge,"Frost at Midnight," lines 45-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Coleridge also makes an intriguing statement about the anticipating mind’s ability to make meaning from noise: “Even when we are broad awake, if we are in anxious expectation, how often will not the most confused sounds of nature be heard by us as articulate sounds? for instance, the babbling of a brook will appear for a moment, the voice of a Friend , for whom we are waiting, calling out our own names.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Christmas Out of Doors,” in *The Friend; : A Series of Essays.* (London: Printed for Gale and Curtis, 1812), http://archive.org/details/friendseriesofes05cole, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John Cage, *Silence: 50th Anniversary Edition*, ed. Kyle Gann (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jacques Attali famously discussed the organization of sounds into music as cultural power and “noise control” as “cultural repression” and defined noise as a relationally constructed category explicitly in the context of sociopolitical and economic power. See Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Theory and History of Literature, v. 16 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 7. As David Novak writes, “Noise…is not really a kind of sound but a metadiscourse of sound and its social interpretation…noise is an essentially relational concept.” David Novak, “Noise” in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds., *Keywords in Sound* (Durham ; London: Duke University Press, 2015), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Michel Chion, *Sound: An Acoulogical Treatise*, trans. James A. Steintrager (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 192-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The previous *Romantic Circles Praxis* volume on sound, “*Soundings of Things Done”: The Poetry and Poetics of Sound in the Romantic Ear and Era*, is an important contribution in this respect, as is Kevin Barry’s *Language, Music, and the Sign*. See Barry, *Language, Music, and the Sign: A Study in Aesthetics, Poetics, and Poetic Practice from Collins to Coleridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Other contributions have tended to focus on a particular writer. See relatively recent work on John Clare (Matthew Rowney, Sam Ward, Stephanie Kuduk Weiner), William Wordsworth (Michele Speitz, Adam Potkay, Carmen Faye Mathes), Percy Shelley (Jessica Quillin) and Coleridge (Norbert Platz and Shelley Trower, in her book on the history of vibration more generally). See Rowney, “Music in the Noise: The Acoustic Ecology of John Clare,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 2016): 23–40; Ward, “‘To List the Song & Not to Start the Thrush’: John Clare’s Acoustic Ecologies,” *John Clare Society Journal* 29 (July 7, 2010): 15–32; Weiner “Listening with John Clare,” *Studies in Romanticism* 48, no. 3 (2009): 371–90; Michele Speitz, “The Wordsworthian Acoustic Imagination, Sonic Recursions, and ‘That Dying Murmur,’” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 55, no. 3 (2015): 621–46, https://doi.org/10.1353/sel.2015.0030.Adam Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).Faye Mathes, “Listening Not Listening: William Wordsworth and the Radical Materiality of Sound,” *European Romantic Review* 28, no. 3 (2017): 315–24; Quillin, *Shelley and the Musico-Poetics of Romanticism* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016); Platz, “The ‘Witchery of Sound’ in S. T. Coleridge’s Soundscape: A Second Approach to Coleridge the Talker,” in *Beyond the suburbs of the mind: Exploring English romanticism : papers delivered at the Mannheim symposium in honour of Hermann Fischer (Studien zur englischen Romantik).* Ed. Michael Gassenmeier and Norbert H. Platz, (Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1987), 137–50; Shelley Trower, *Senses of Vibration: A History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound* (New York: Continuum, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It bears consideration, too, that listening and hearing are not mutually exclusive. One can listen without managing to hear anything, and vice versa. I suggest that Romanticism frames listening, whether or not it results in the definitive perception of an audible tone, as a mode of vibrational aurality. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight” lines 17-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rei Terada calls it “surely one of the most indefinite and transient objects ever to be the focus of a poem.” Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See for example Tim Fulford’s reading aeration in the poem in his challenge to readings of the conversation poems as “attempt[s] to transcend materiality.” For Fulford, the weakness of the flutter of the grate in otherwise “static” air is ‘under-stimulating’ and so recalls moments of similarly fitful desire for mental arousal, and it is not until Coleridge is “revived by Hartley’s breathings” that he becomes “mentally lively” enough to envision “a future harmony between self, world, and God.” Fulford, “Science and Poetry in 1790s Somerset: The Self-Experiment Narrative, the Aeriform Effusion, and the Greater Romantic Lyric,” *ELH* 85, no. 1 (2018), 86; 98. Martin Bidney, who argues that “Coleridgean visionary motion is typically tremulous or fitful,” acknowledges the ‘elemental’ force of air behind the film’s motion as well, but uses the flutter’s “extreme frailty” to find precarity behind the visionary anticipation Coleridge drums up. Bidney, “The Structure of Epiphanic Imagery in Ten Coleridge Lyrics,” *Studies in Romanticism* 22, no. 1 (1983), 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jonathan Sterne’s “audiovisual litany” is a useful primer on the most typically rehearsed distinctions between sight and sound. The shift from subject-object (looking) to a reciprocal subject-subject dynamic (listening) is of immense importance to theorists interested in distinguishing audition as a unique sensorial mode. See Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Jonathan Sterne, Alexandra Hui, and Shelley Trower for particularly thorough accounts of the history of acoustics. Sterne, *The Audible Past;* Alexandra Hui, *The Psychophysical Ear: Musical Experiments, Experimental Sounds, 1840-1910* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2013); Trower, *Senses of Vibration*. For Sterne, Chladni’s discoveries are the “founding moment of modern acoustics,” in which “attempts to visualize sound…coincided with the construction of sound as an object of knowledge in its own right.” Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 43. Benjamin Steege, on the other hand, has argued that to frame Chladni as a “founder of modern acoustics” is to occlude even earlier contributions by Francis Bacon and Joseph Saveur in particular. See Benjamin Steege, “Acoustics,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Benjamin Steege (Duke University Press, 2015): 22–32, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. I am thankful to C.C. Wharram’s presentation of his paper entitled “Aeolian Associationism; or, The Ele-mental Resonance of Romantic Things” at NASSR 2019, which helped to spark my interest in Chladni’s pre-Helmholtz acoustics. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. As Alan Richardson summarizes, “‘Motions’ from the external environment, Hartley proposed, bombard the senses in such a way as to cause vibrations, which run along the ‘medullary substance’ of the nerves, solid but porous cords with 'infinitesimally small particles’ of Newtonian ether diffused throughout. These vibrations or oscillations then trigger corresponding tiny vibrations (‘vibratiuncles’) in the medullary substance of the brain.” Alan Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. I want to be careful not to make assumptions about how well-known Chladni’s work would have been in England in its time. However, there was clearly pervasive interest in vibration circulating in discourses to which Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley were attuned. Kant and Burke reference sound vibration, as does Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who writes in in *Essay on the Origin of Languages* that “the beauty of sounds is from nature; their effect is purely physical, it results from the interaction of the various particles of air set in motion by the sounding body.” See Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages in Collected Writings of Rousseau: Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music.* trans. John T. Scott. (Hanover, US: Dartmouth UP, 2000),321. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. E.F.F. Chladni, *Treatise on Acoustics*, trans. Beyer, Robert T. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Chladni, *Treatise on Acoustics* 1 (emphasis in original). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Chladni, *Treatise on Acoustics* 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful: And Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley, Penguin Classics (London ; New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. For Kant as well, the knowledge that hearing involves subjection to soundwaves is central, and his description of the relationship between the imagination and the mind relies heavily on musical language. Kant explains that the movement of the mind involved with the quality of pleasure in the judgment of the sublime is comparable to “vibration” (“Erschütterung,” alternately translated as shock or shaking) created by “rapidly alternating repulsion and attraction” to the object. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Nicholas Walker, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. As Wolfson and others have noted, Coleridge’s meditation on sound’s potential for completely immersive sublimity in his recollection of a storm sounds very much like Burke’s noisy sublime: “during the whole night, such were the thunders and howlings of the breaking ice, that they have left a conviction on my mind, that there are Sounds more sublime than any Sight can be, more absolutely suspending the power of comparison, and more utterly absorbing the mind’s self-consciousness in it’s [sic] total attention to the object working upon it” (*The Friend* 302). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 123. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Zadie Smith, “Some Notes on Attunement: A Voyage around Joni Mitchell.,” *The New Yorker*, December 10, 2012, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight," lines 28-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Though it lies beyond the scope of this essay, the embrace of the possibility of finding beauty and meaning in noise is perhaps most commonly presented in the Romantic affinity for the æolian lyre as a model for creative activity; though tuned with musical intention, the sound patterns wind harps produce are more or less random, and their effect can often be harmonically jumbled, a quality Percy Shelley seems to acknowledge when he notes in *A Defence of Poetry* that in contrast with the “ever-changing melody” of a lyre, the human mind produces “an internal adjustment of the sound or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them” (page 511). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence*, 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. John Keats, *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings and Jon Mee, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* bk 13, lines 56-63. All references to *The Prelude* are to the 1805 version. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2nd ed, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” lines 128-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” line144 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Nancy, *Listening*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid., 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk 5 lines 408-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk 13 line 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk 5 lines 399-404. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., bk 5 lines 404-409 [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Speitz, “The Wordsworthian Acoustic Imagination, Sonic Recursions, and ‘That Dying Murmur,’” 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. For Adam Potkay, hearing is an ethical counterpoint to seeing in Wordsworth. “Before we can be ethically open to other humans, responsive to them in their alterity,” he writes, “we need first to open ourselves to idling and inhuman things in a way that habituates us to asymmetrical sympathy. To do this, in turn, we need to be attuned to languages that are not ‘articulate,’ that is, literally, composed of distinctive, serial sounds.” See Potkay, *Wordsworth’s Ethics*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Hartman, Geoffrey H., *Wordsworth’s Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Wordsworth, *The Prelude,* bk 13 line 43. In *Modernity’s Mist*,Emily Rohrbach identifies mist as “central…to [Wordsworth’s] poetic self-reflection” (3) in the Snowdon passage. Her theorization of an “anticipatory” temporality in Romanticism locates in the concept of mist “epistemological uncertainty” and Keatsian negative capability similar to that which I am attaching to the concept of unquiet noise. Rohrbach, *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, bk 13 lines 52-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., bk 13, line 67 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., bk 13, lines 98-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., bk 13, lines 102-105 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., bk 13, lines 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., bk 13, line 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Critics have frequently contemplated how “Mont Blanc” embodies in aurally evocative verse the experience that inspired it. As Susan Wolfson puts it, “Shelley takes [Wordsworth’s scene in ‘The Solitary Reaper’] of boundless audition to the Alps, and replays it with a sense of poetry aspiring, not to tame, but to run wild with antiphony and metrical disorder.” See Wolfson, “Sounding Romantic: The Sound of Sound,” 32. In William Keach’s oft-recalled reading, “Rhyme in *Mont Blanc* is one important way in which Shelley’s verbal imagination structures and shapes, without giving a closed or determinate pattern to, an experience which defies structuring and shaping.” William Keach, *Shelley’s Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984), 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” lines 4-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Anne C. McCarthy, “The Aesthetics of Contingency in the Shelleyan ‘Universe of Things’, or, ‘Mont Blanc’ without Mont Blanc,” *Studies in Romanticism* 54, no. 3 (2015 Fall 2015): 355-375, 358. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Shelley, “Mont Blanc,” line 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., lines 139-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid., lines 39-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Antonio de Luca, Dave Taft, and Umi Syam, “Hear 13 Birds Flourishing in a Newly Quiet New York - The New York Times,” May 31, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/05/31/nyregion/coronavirus-birding-nyc.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Thomas Lecocq et al., “Global Quieting of High-Frequency Seismic Noise Due to COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown Measures,” *Science*, July 23, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abd2438. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Bianca Bosker, “Why Everything Is Getting Louder,” *The Atlantic*, November 2019 Issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)