SOUND AND VISION: SONIC EXPERIENCE IN WORDSWORTH, BLAKE, AND CLARE

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Abstract

This dissertation re-orient the study of Romantic poetry by advocating a shift in Romanticist critical discourse away from the visual sensorium and towards a focus on sound. I examine three major poets—William Wordsworth, William Blake, and John Clare—whose work has been critiqued, celebrated, or otherwise understood through a critical focus both centered on and shaped by tropes of visuality. An investigation of poetic sound, I argue, helps us understand the work of these poets on a more fundamental level. Sound was used by these writers to promote the aesthetic mode of experience over and against social and intellectual forces that threatened the essential freedom of the human imagination. In doing so, they were also writing against a millenia-old tradition in Western thought that privileged visual over aural experience.
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Introduction

Don’t you wonder sometimes
’bout sound and vision

- David Bowie

A deeply ingrained bias in favor of the visual sensorium pervades Western thought. The verb “to know” in ancient Greek (eidenai) derives etymologically from “horain,” a form of the verb “to see.”¹ Plato, in the Timaeus, held that sight, the sense positioned highest on the body, suggested a natural hierarchy of sensation. For Plato, sight gives us our clearest ideas about the physical world as well as the ideals of order and harmony that the physical world reflects.² Where Aristotle might be expected to differ from Plato and disavow a hierarchy of the senses, he nevertheless held the faculty of sight to be the “superior sense” that “brings tidings of multitudes of distinctive qualities of all sorts.”³ Augustine based his theory of the senses on the trinity,

¹ Each in turn can be traced to the Proto-Indo-European roots, weyd- and wer-, both of which carry the dual meaning of knowing and seeing (A Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed., s.vv. “εἰδω,” “ὁραω”).
complementing Plato with the assertion that sight was the most apt analogy for the mind and therefore the best sense for perceiving natural and spiritual truths as well as the analogical truth that bound them. The privileged status of sight in the human sensorium persisted through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, during which it found particularly eloquent expression in the following passage from da Vinci’s *Treatise on Painting*:

The eye is the window of the human body through which it examines its way in the world and enjoys the beauty of the world. Because of this the soul is content in its human prison, and without sight this human prison is its torment; by means of the eye human industry has found fire, so that the eye itself reacquired that which darkness had previously taken away. The eye has ornamented nature with agriculture, and delightful gardens. But what need is there to extend myself in such heights and lengths of discourse? What has not been done by the eye? It moves men from east to west, has found navigation; it surpasses nature because things made by nature are finite, and the works that the eye commands of the hands are infinite, as the painter shows in his feignings of infinite forms of animals, herbs, plants, and places.

Put simply, by the time of the Renaissance the sense of sight had come to symbolize not only human reason but the whole range of human possibility and comprehension,

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including insight and imagination. The sense of sight was seen to underlie nearly all major intellectual pursuits, from the psychology of memory to theology, experimental science, rhetoric, poetry, and painting.6

As part of their inheritance from the Renaissance, this bias towards sight was also operative for Enlightenment thinkers, for whom truth in nature, or significance in literature, was supposed to be manifest, self-evident. Benjamin, writing of Kepler, Copernicus, and Brahe, suggested that the legacy bequeathed by the Renaissance was one of intensifying ocular fixation: the “exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come.”7 Bishop Berkeley thought of nature as a divinely instituted visual language;8 for the eighteenth-century encyclopedists, the universe was a so-called book of nature or diagrammable labyrinth;9 while Pope’s An Essay on Criticism figured these visual metaphors for the literary mind with its discourse of “Fair Arrays,” “Misshaped

Appearances,” “Blind Judgments” and “nature to advantage dressed.” If for Pope
“sound should seem an echo of the sense” in literature, he does not mean that poetic
sound should produce meaning but, on the contrary, that such meaning should
ultimately be derived from the physical appearance and activity of whatever a poem’s
words describe.10 Further, Locke called sight the most comprehensive of all the
senses,11 and Burke’s treatise on the sublime concerned itself primarily with the search
for visual correlates capable of manifesting the invisible—Burke’s paradigmatic
sublime experience is that of Lucretius’s awestruck observer viewing a shipwreck
from the safety of shore.12

But the later eighteenth century marked the Kantian aesthetic turn in theories
of knowledge and experience. After Kant, Aristotle’s “common sensibilia,” which
formed ideas through the faculty of sight, were no longer held to be qualities of
external objects but qualities of the mind itself.13 This internalization had the effect of

10 The Poems of Alexander Pope: A Reduced Version of the Twickenham Text, ed. John
11 John Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch
12 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime
and Beautiful, ed. J.T. Boulton (1958; repr., Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University
Press, 1968), 69. Burke describes some instances of the sublime caused by sound, but
these are negligible exceptions to the rule demonstrated by his visually oriented
theory.
13 David Wellbery, “Aesthetic Media: The Structure of Aesthetic Theory before Kant,”
in Regimes of Description: In the Archive of the Eighteenth Century, ed. John Bender
Wellbery shows how Kant subsumed the sensuous approaches to art taken by Lessing
and others into a more numinous focus that dominated aesthetics for well over a
century.
reducing the importance of sight in conceptual schemes of knowledge formation, rendering philosophical references to sight in the arts and sciences increasingly metaphorical in the poetic or vatic senses of the words “insight” and “vision.” For Kant, aesthetic experience precedes perception in such a way that “we see what we judge.”"14 During the Romantic age, references to physical vision, in the domain of the arts particularly, gave way to a manner of speaking about inner or metaphorical vision. Precisely because vision in this sense came to have as little to do with the visual as with any other regime of sensual representation, it still holds currency for us today across intellectual disciplines and modes of thought. A Nobel-winning chemist as well as a social activist or conceptual artist may be spoken of as a visionary. But nobody attributes their respective achievements to their sense of sight.

One effect of the Kantian revolution in aesthetics was that hierarchies of the senses in aesthetic doctrine were no longer tenable. This legitimized the growing tendency of eighteenth-century empiricist aesthetics to engage in discourse on “taste,” one of the lower senses in classical theory. Kant himself found taste to be an amenable category for discussing the arts.15 By settling on taste as a more suitable metaphor for the faculty of judgment that mediates between mind and world through the creation of aesthetic ideas, Kant participated in a period-wide trend that was more aware of the links between the literal and metaphorical senses of “taste” than the abstraction of the

Critique of Judgment can reveal.⁰¹⁶ Even so, by the end of the eighteenth century, this experiment of the aesthetic philosophers with the lower sensorium was growing exhausted, especially for some of the major romantic poets. In the “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” Wordsworth satirizes those “who will converse with us gravely about a taste for poetry, as they express it, as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontenac or Sherry.”⁰¹⁷ Coleridge also complained of the discourse of taste in his *Philosophical Lectures*, where he writes: “One may say I delight in Milton and Shakespeare more than Turtle or Venison…that is not my case—for myself I think a good dish of turtle and a good bottle of port afterwards give me much more delight than I receive from Milton and Shakespeare—you must not dispute about tastes.”⁰¹⁸

As far as the Romantic period is concerned, then, it would be helpful to approach poetic theory and practice through a different sensory channel than that celebrated either by the Man of Taste or by the visually oriented Mechanical Philosopher. If the vacuum left by the crumbling of the classical sense hierarchy was filled only a short time by taste as a fresh emblem of aesthetic experience before its welcome expired, the sense of smell associated with taste (and underlying many of its metaphorical uses) would have quickly gone acrid for the Romantics as well.

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Moreover, touch must prove an impossible point of reference for working through the intangible issues of poetic form and theory that concerned Romantic writers—though as a heuristic in material histories of the book it would be undoubtedly useful. This leaves sound.

Although poetic sound and soundscapes have played a role in the interpretation of poems from the New Criticism onwards, Romantic poetry has remained strangely immune to sonic evaluation. The Romantic poet’s engagement with the world is consistently rendered as empirical, observational, a mode of looking. Recent studies have described the Romantic poetic project variously as proto-ecology, taking cues for its literary forms from disturbances observed in natural ecosystems; as articulating various degrees of a “natural sublime” based on descriptive scenes of travel, exploration, and astronomical observation; as being constituted around certain totemic objects witnessed in the landscape; as a body of work linking sensation to the empirical observations of the period’s medical experimenters; as an attempt to render natural forms as a set of hieroglyphics; as a material aesthetic influenced by

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literal accounts of the landscape found in material science;\textsuperscript{24} and as a continuation of
the visually oriented models of mental experience outlined by Locke, Hartley, and
Priestley.\textsuperscript{25} Still older and more influential accounts were the first to establish
ocularcentrism in romantic studies: according to one, the Romantic poetic image
expresses nostalgia for an absent divinity through descriptions of nature, and
consequently poetic imagery seeks to draw closer to the permanent ontological status
of the natural object.\textsuperscript{26} According to another, the Romantic image seeks to achieve
“iconicity” by producing implied meanings through direct, unadorned presentations of
visual experience.\textsuperscript{27} Abrams contrasted Romanticism with its predecessors using
visual paradigms that survive to this day for talking about the literary imagination,\textsuperscript{28}
and Praz was one of the first modernists to resuscitate the Romantic legacy for the
twentieth century, doing so by tracing a language of visual eroticism that he found in
the period’s writers.\textsuperscript{29}

All such interpretations neglect an essential relationship between poetic vision
and the sense of sound. In Susan Stewart’s rich description of the sensation of poetic
reading, the visible presence of a poetic utterance in a reader’s mind originates in the

\begin{itemize}
\item Noah Heringman, \textit{Romantic Rocks: Aesthetic Geology} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell
University Press, 2004).
\item Jerome McGann, \textit{The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style} (Oxford:
\item Paul de Man, “Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image,” in \textit{Romanticism and
\item W.K. Wimsatt, “The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery,” in \textit{Romanticism and
Consciousness}, 77–89.
\item M.H. Abrams, \textit{The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical
\item Mario Praz, \textit{The Romantic Agony} (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).
\end{itemize}
inner ear’s sounding of it, even if the act of reading begins with looking at words on the page. With the technology of the book, a poem may be easily encountered through sight, but a poem lives only through sound, with its lifespan depending entirely on the duration of its utterance in the echo of memory after any initial reading:

When sound turns back to silence, beyond pattern, it returns to nothingness: its condition of invisibility again makes its claim, and we are no longer able to figure the line of its form. This relation between invisibility and visibility—between infinite silence and darkness on the one hand and beholding on the other—is… the most profound aspect of poetry’s relation to vision. The cliché of the blind poet is one we must take seriously—for the poet beholds the other and at the same time creates the conditions for beholding, seeing without needing to see. The poet is summoned by another and in turn summons another into presence. The reader or hearer of the poem recalls these forms of summoning when she attributes intention to the poem as a made form. 

In this passage, “visibility” refers to a quality of sound in the reader’s mind as the poem’s structure or “pattern” is embodied by interior monologue; similarly, “invisibility” is equated with silence as the poem is shut up again in its book, its lines after a time ceasing their refrain in the mind’s ear. This is a resuscitation of the vitality poetry enjoys in oral cultures for a culture of print in late-stage decline. Stewart

celebrates the visionary cliché inaugurated by Romanticism because it underlines what
she sees as the fundamental effect of poetic vision, one we must return to if poetry is
ever to recapture its position of social prestige: chiefly, the dependence of an imagined
sense of sight on an imagined sense of hearing that arises from the universal impulse
to ascribe living presence and intention to an immaterial poetic voice. This impulse
would appear to be sensory in its response, though nothing in the shape of a person or
the sound of a human voice exists physically before the reader. It is a kind of spell cast
by an imagined sense of sound. This spell has slowly been either forgotten or attacked
by modern culture, though the Romantics recognized its importance. When a poem is
being read, true, it is first being seen by the reader. But its pattern can only be sensed
as a vital whole through sound, which allows the poem a livelihood so inseparable
from a reader’s mental life that, as Wordsworth stated, it “hangs upon the beatings” of
one’s heart.

Stewart’s definition of the poetic reading experience is central to my purpose
for a number of reasons. First, our narrative of the development of modern poetry
hinges on it, for the question of whether a poem is seen or heard calls us back to
fundamental concerns about the ways in which verbal art mediates between sensual
instinct and intellectual freedom, the two incommensurable realms of Cartesian
experience that so much poetic theory and expression of the Romantic period sought
to reunite.31 Twentieth century modes of criticism taught us that language and

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31 See, for instance, Louise Chawla, In the First Country of Places: Nature, Poetry,
and Childhood Memory (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 147:
“…where Cartesian dualism established a division between mind and a mechanized
perception perform an intricate dance in every strongly complex poem by attempting to reconstruct the poem as object or image: formalism gave us a well-wrought urn, deconstruction an abyss or void, and historicism a bill of intellectual capital, circulating through the power structures and random events of the cultural materialist’s nightmarish past. But it will be my argument in the chapters that follow that some of the touchstones of Romantic poetry achieve their heights of complexity and imaginative freedom through specific reflections on the significance of sound as a sense with which to think experimentally about issues of landscape, community, and imagination. Specifically, I want to show how sound is bound up for these poets in structures of thought that often run against the grain of traditional interpretations of them. In doing so, I differ from one recent discussion of sound in Romantic poetry that I believe falters by re-inscribing conventional assumptions about the Romantics in their use of sound:

Sounds spoke to poets, long before they recognized their own calling, and many of the poems written in maturity reflect a life-long delight in the music of the everyday. The unfailing quality of aural enjoyment meant that familiar sounds often provided a reassuring sense of continuity in a world where so much pleasure seemed transient. The natural music of streams, breezes and birds or the regular ringing of church bells not only awakened immediate delight, but also

nature, the Romantics established a ‘vital and productive’ dialectic with a spiritualized nature.”
recollections of pleasures past and therefore hope for similar experience in the future.³²

Such an account of sound, with its emphasis on the “music of the everyday,” “recollections of pleasures past,” and “reassuring sense of continuity” would have little new to say about Wordsworth, certainly, and not much more to say about many of the other great poets of the period. Instead of informing an account of poetic sound with received ideas about a poet’s philosophy or aesthetics, I hope to work outwards from sound to new ideas about the ways in which Romantic poetics thought about poetry and experience. By attending closely to sound in the work of three Romantic poets, I hope to demonstrate the expansive and creative potentiality they found in what they heard, in direct contrast to what they understood to be the limiting confines of the sense of sight.

Second, an “antiocularcentric” shift from sight to sound in the study of Romantic poetry allows me to claim for my project a commitment to close reading in the vein of a revitalized practical criticism. My efforts are in the direction of describing how exactly a poet might texture verse in such a way as to activate for a reader the kind of difficult response Stewart describes.³³ Further, I want to show the specific contours of persona and place that each poet makes present through sound.

³³ I borrow the term “antiocularcentrism” from Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 87, 95, 588. However, I do not intend to borrow the critical sense with which Jay imbues the word in order to highlight certain excessive rejections of “scopic regimes” in poststructuralist philosophy.
For Wordsworth, Blake, and Clare, poetic self-presentation through sound differs as widely as each poet’s engagement with sound does. Only a detailed account of how each poet thinks with sound through the medium of poetic language can reveal these differences. Recently, a call for “surface reading” of literary texts has articulated what sounds an awful lot like a return to close-reading practices concerned to demonstrate how poems work instead of how they exemplify the metalanguages of literary theory.34 Sound in and of itself is so abstract that a poet’s choice of what to do with it in a poem is practically limitless; therefore extensive description of the ways in which the sound of poems is threaded with sounds represented by poems is necessary in order to determine exactly what a poet intends by his poem’s sounds. It is precisely this delicate relationship between sound in the lived environment and potential sound embedded within the poem, only activated once read, that makes an “audiocentric” method such an ideal test case for the strength of surface reading. By contrast, the described sights of the English landscape or of the city of London were, by the Romantic period, as hemmed in by literary associations as the sense of sight in general was by millennia of dominance by visual epistemologies. Any accounting for the sense of sight in Romantic poetry leads inevitably to concerns that pre-date or are otherwise extraneous to the poem. Sound leads us more directly towards the new thought for a new age that Romantic poets saw themselves creating.

It is this last concern that leads me to open with a historicist reading of “Tintern Abbey.” Wordsworth’s extended lyric on the passage of time and the

disenchantments of adult life has in recent decades been used as exhibit A in debates over the proximity or distance of Romantic poetry to the actual historical conditions that coincided with its production. Too often, Wordsworth has been condemned for his willingness to look at certain aspects of the landscape and rural society but not at others. Influentially, this has produced a significant school of romanticists who render the substance of their interpretations of “Tintern Abbey” as a discomfort with political opinions Wordsworth expressed long after the poem’s composition. My argument is that a re-orientation of the poem’s sensorium away from the scopic regime that has dominated responses to it—and towards a rich soundscape influenced by the history of chant practices at the abbey that come with a set of communal values and a transcendental ethic perfectly at home with rusticity and simple life—reveals that the political commitments Wordsworth expresses in the poem are not so reducible to contemporary frames of reference. Moreover, this reading demonstrates how debates over whether “Tintern” is an ode, a ballad, or a lyric have helped to obscure its soundscape by promoting a solitary, egotistical speaker deaf even to his own uttered intentions.

Next I turn to a reading of Blake’s Jerusalem that attempts to show the centrality of sound in Blake’s description of man’s ability to perceive eternity. In Jerusalem an important distinction is made between temporal and eternal time, which plays a key role in Blake’s symbolic narration of Albion’s death and resurrection to eternal life. Taking Jesus’s enigmatic pronouncements in the New Testament as a point of reference, Blake makes Jerusalem “hard to hear.” Much of the prophecy’s notorious difficulty, in other words, can be understood as the difficulty of hearing
speech out of “the mouth of a true orator,” as Jerusalem’s opening instructions demand that it be heard. A true orator for Blake is both a poet and a prophet, one who speaks a heightened human language in expression of a vision that delineates the truth of human existence, which for Blake is one of eternal creative pursuit and imaginative construction of reality. Consequently, Blake identifies Los, the creative principle in his mythology and the hero of Jerusalem, with the sense of sound. Previous critics have generally agreed on two points: Jerusalem is a poem about perception, and the sense of sound one perceives within it is harsh, discordant, and obscure. There is so much difficult noise to make sense of in Jerusalem, in fact, that it has become background noise for many of Blake’s commentators, despite Blake’s efforts to move those sounds into the foreground at key moments in the poem when transitions are being made from sleep to waking life, from opaque death to redemptive clarity. Structurally, Jerusalem places a great deal of emphasis on the synchronic timeline of its events and character development—a formal choice that is at once necessary for conveying Blake’s beliefs about the nature of the soul’s existence and its relation to human imagination, and one that confounds readers who attempt to trace a narrative in the poem. I demonstrate how attention to sound allows a reader of Jerusalem to attend more easily to that synchronicity as Blake is often eager to show how sound is the sense most easily capable of transcending boundaries of time and space. Blake maintained a vexed relationship to sense experience throughout his work, viewing all but the most joyful of sensations as deceptive. Ultimately, though, I show that prophetic “vision” consists for Blake more of sound than of any other sense.
Finally, my third chapter examines Clare’s use of sound to come to terms with his own creative presence in natural scenes that he often celebrated for their absence of human activity. My reading of Clare diverges from those of his enthusiasts who wish to see in his work a poet who let the landscape exist on its own terms and somehow merely collected the images that a mute field or forest produced for him. Often, this is seen as the source of Clare’s integrity as a poet, as the look of the landscape, un-interfered with by a meddling artist, could convey much better through simple dictation the beauty no poetic sensibility could truly render. Instead, I read Clare’s poetic project as his search for a way to reconcile a love of nature with the human impulse to remake natural forms into ones more recognizable to an aesthetic sensibility. The dynamic I trace in Clare’s work is one in which poems usually begin with visual description of wild, untouched vistas and then undergo a change of temperament as Clare becomes self-conscious of himself as a source of that description. Sound succeeds visual description in these instances as Clare’s preferred method for acknowledging the way in which he has melded nature and artifice in the composition of the poem. My reading of Clare fits in with very recent attempts to revise the standard view of him as a naïve genius, basically a vestige of his fame as a peasant poet during the 1820s (a public image he eventually loathed). I choose to read poems that he wrote for The Midsummer Cushion, a collection that during Clare’s lifetime remained unpublished in the form he desired for it, because it is the volume that represents Clare’s own concerted effort to break free of the patronizing market forces that shaped his earlier works. Particularly, I read “The Progress of Rhyme” and “Pastoral Poesy,” Clare’s efforts in the ars poetica genre, to show how the dynamic
swing from sight to sound in Clare’s poetry is embedded in his deepest reflections on the theory of poetry and his own development as a poet.

The artful use of sound in literature is intimidating and difficult to explain. Despite offering an analysis of three Romantic poets in the chapters that follow, I have thought of *The Tempest*’s sound-haunted Caliban as a presiding spirit in the course of my thinking about them:

Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.  

Ariel does his best to frighten Stephano and Trinculo off the trail of their plotting against Prospero, the island’s magus and oft-interpreted stand-in for Shakespeare himself. Playing an untraceable music to accompany their drunken a capella boasting, Ariel reduces the eager usurpers to cowering ephebes, reminding them that true power lies in the magical halo that inexplicably and invisibly surrounds so much of the island. It is a fitting allegory for any exegete who contemplates approaching a poetic

soundscape with the presumption of catching its notes mid-resonance and interpreting them even as they captivate, their echoes resounding in the ear long after conclusions have been reached. In the best poets, poetic sound continually suggests that its interpretation falls short, must be revised. Sound effects in poetry are often subdued to a background hum, residing just under the skrim of words that articulate so much else besides sound. But Caliban is every poet’s ideal reader because he investigates sound while submitting to it. The irony of Caliban’s humble tone is that he too is plotting against Prospero to make the island his own. Caliban is compelled to listen, and at the same time he seeks to understand the effects such strange sound produces in his mind. Through this process of submissive, tentative discovery, Shakespeare implies, Caliban seeks to become Prospero’s equal, ultimately failing in the attempt.

In “Caliban upon Setibos,” a poem whose subtitle is “Natural Theology in the Island,” Browning depicts Caliban’s justification of God’s works as an overreaching effort to become God’s equal. The poem’s subtitle implies that its theodicy will be based solely on descriptions of visually observed natural forms and processes. Yet three-quarters of the way through this lengthy dramatic monologue, Browning also lets slip his Caliban is blind. The significance of this subtle detail, passed over with the standard speed of Browning’s loquacious pentameters, is immense. The cliché of the blind visionary that lies at the heart of so much poetic experience is once again active: sound is the crucial ingredient in effecting all the lyric presence we had only thought was strictly visual. Indeed, sound is the sense that elevates Caliban to God’s

height in the poem’s most vivid analogy of God and man, expressive of all the creative resplendence and enormous cruelty that each is capable of—before crushing him back down to mortal perspective:

’Hath cut a pipe of pithless elder-joint
That, blown through, gives exact the scream o’ the jay
When from her wing you twitch the feathers blue:
Sound this, and little birds that hate the jay
Flock within stone’s throw, glad their foe is hurt:
Put case such pipe could prattle and boast forsooth
‘I catch the birds, I am the crafty thing,
I make the cry my maker cannot make
With his great round mouth; he must blow through mine!’
Would not I smash it with my foot? So He.37

Any act of poetic interpretation, done in good faith, should also to some extent acknowledge its submission to the works it claims to comprehend. By means of such acknowledgment, the act of interpretation is inescapably also one of imitation, despite the critic’s strongest efforts; and Caliban’s experience represents the truth that imitation of a superior force is always an exercise in humility.

37 Ibid., 128.
Wordsworth and the Monks of Tintern Abbey

Thus strangely did I war against myself;
A bigot to a new idolatry,
Did like a monk who hath forsworn the world
Zealously labour to cut off my heart
From all the sources of her former strength

- The Prelude (1805)  

Standing on a promontory overlooking Tintern Abbey and the Wye Valley in 1798, Wordsworth sought to realign old political engagements in terms less nationalist than aesthetic. Consequently, the described landscape of “Tintern Abbey” is permeated by tropes of music and sound. As abruptly as its second line, “Tintern Abbey” puns on “here” / “hear”: “Five years have passed; five summers, with the length / Of five long

3 Because my argument is concerned with the relationship of poetic language to sound and romantic-era musicology, I want to stress here that my use of “trope” in this essay refers to that word’s literary and rhetorical sense of figurative language, not to its designation in musicology of tones or modalities.
Winters! and again I hear / These waters” (1-3); a pun later repeated twice (63; 115).

Wordsworth finally makes the link between scene and sound explicit as his poetic persona projects Dorothy Wordsworth’s memory “as a dwelling-place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies” (142-3). At the same time, several of the poem’s most resonant aural metaphors strongly qualify the visual prospect of industrial-era Tintern Abbey: the “eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony” (48-9) and the “still, sad music of humanity” (92) chief among them, along with “all the mighty world / Of eye and ear, both what they half-create / And what perceive” (106-8).

This acoustic array is bonded indissolubly to the visual setting, while also proving irreducible to materialist accounts of the poem’s descriptive mode. Even so, as a result of their complex symbolic structure, several influential accounts of Wordsworth’s visual descriptions of the abbey’s surrounding scenery have focused on what is perceived to be Wordsworth’s increasingly conservative poetic practice during the 1790s. But Tintern Abbey, ruined during the English Reformation, may have been

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4 William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey,” in Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797–1800 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 116–20. Line numbers for “Tintern Abbey” are given throughout the main text of this essay in parentheses. In the notes, non-poetic text from this volume is cited as LB with page numbers; page numbers follow titles in the notes to all other poetry from the Cornell Wordsworth.

attractive to Wordsworth as a site of resistance to a conservative national identity he finds problematic at the close of a tumultuous decade.⁶ Like his fascination with the Lake District, Wordsworth’s tour of the Wye Valley was possibly motivated by the poet’s sympathy with a “particular kind of English radicalism, one which used a view of rural landscape and society to make arguments about the government of the nation.”⁷ Yet the abbey was far from a locus of the period’s radical politics, often serving instead as one of many destinations sought during an English vogue for picturesque scenery imbued with nostalgic interpretations of the past.⁸ Given these conflicted political associations, visual description of the abbey’s environs can be conceived as symbolic of political division itself. I would suggest that “Tintern

materialist account of Wordsworth’s conservative, politically motivated approach to visual description.

⁶ On the significance of Britain’s ruined abbeys for the “radically purified” and “uncontaminated religion of nature” that developed in sympathetic response to the French Revolution, see Robert M. Ryan, The Romantic Reformation: Religious Politics in English Literature, 1789–1824 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 89–91; see also the “History of Monasteries” appended to Charles Heath, ed., A Descriptive Account of Tintern Abbey (Monmouth, UK, 1793), 62–76—a capsule narrative of the Reformation-era destruction of Tintern Abbey and other monasteries that encouraged visitors to associate social and religious upheaval with the site. Heath’s anthology was printed in and sold to tourists on their way to Tintern.


Abbey,” in its portrayals of sound, presents an alternative to such division with great sensitivity to these conflicting resonances.

Paul Fry notes of the poem’s somatic soundscape that the “music heard by the almost insensate contemplative is the sound of being that re-unites human beings with other[s] in a common ‘dwelling.’”9 The visual sensorium of “Tintern Abbey,” in other words, diminishes at key moments, leaving only sound to work upon and within an “almost insensate” consciousness. According to Fry, readers encounter the “still, sad music” of an attenuated “isolation that overcomes alienation,” a state of being that amounts to a protest against “Enlightenment distractions”10 such as practical reason and analytic attention to the visibly observable features of reality.11 The present essay is partly an attempt to give flesh to Fry’s ontological abstraction: What kind of “contemplative” can Wordsworth imagine himself to be? What music is capable of producing the sensation that an individual is dissolving into a collective? And, historically, what “beings” recognized themselves as initiates of this projected reunification?

The title of “Tintern Abbey” cites a kind of pre-Heideggerian “common dwelling” that functioned as an object of strong symbolic fascination for Wordsworth. In 1814 Wordsworth indicated the importance of monastic architecture to him when

9 Paul Fry, Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 180.
10 Ibid., 181.
he described his published poems as “little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses” standing in relation to The Recluse, just as the “Anti-chapel” stands in relation “to the body of a gothic Church.” Further, just before setting out for the walking tour of Wales during which “Tintern Abbey” would be composed, Wordsworth dined with Richard Warner, author of a popular book about the Wye Valley, whose familiarity with the abbey’s Cistercian past is evident in his written descriptions of its grounds.

If one can accept that Mont Blanc at a certain point gives way to Mont St. Michel in the poet’s conception of philosophic song, then “Tintern Abbey” must stand as that conception’s oratory chapel and altar. Amplifying the significance of this metaphor in acoustic terms will allow me to revise the widespread critical description of “Tintern Abbey” as a “poem in the eye” and advocate a fine-grained attention instead to what Wordsworth called the “impassioned music of its versification.” My goal is to demonstrate how aural tropes work in “Tintern Abbey” with reference to the abbey itself, which has largely been absent from Wordsworth studies because our

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13 LB, 13.
15 Wordsworth appends this note to “Tintern Abbey” in the 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads, LB, 357.
criticism has deemed it absent from the poem.¹⁶ David Bromwich has indicated that Wordsworth, like Edmund Burke, was “concerned with the ideal function…of monkish institutions,” which played a considerable role in Wordsworth’s selection of Tintern Abbey as the setting for his greatest lyric poem.¹⁷ Still, Bromwich can treat this idea with only so much depth since he, like Levinson, is convinced that Wordsworth attempts to conceal the abbey.¹⁸

In what follows, I read “Tintern Abbey” as a musical inscription, almost as a recording, to complement the imitative memorial inscription of its title. Like Adam Potkay, I interpret the poem’s music “both as referent and as the sound of Wordsworth’s metrical lines”; it both depicts “blended sounds of outer nature” and is the product of “an emanation or abstraction” embodied in language.¹⁹ In my own reading, the emanation is historical and its abstraction concerns the reformist rhetoric of religious chant practices. For underlying the language of the poem’s descriptive eye is its less explored but equally powerful language of the listening ear and collective

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¹⁷ Bromwich, Disowned by Memory, 79.
¹⁸ Bromwich, though his is the first serious discussion of a “monkish” context to “Tintern Abbey,” declares that its “long title…is matched by no description of the ruin in the poem itself,” 78. By this he intends, rightly, that Wordsworth provided no visual description of the abbey.
¹⁹ Adam Potkay, Wordsworth’s Ethics (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 94.
voice, a language that parallels both contemporary debates over the practice of psalmody and the history of the abbey’s own vocal music.²⁰

If the visuality of “Tintern Abbey” has in recent decades come to be involved with interpretations of the poem’s politics, my larger claim is that a shift in focus from the visible to the audible illuminates aspects of Wordsworth’s poetic theory as it exists in practice—aspects that center more around communion than division. Far from instantiating Keats’s remarks about Wordsworth’s egotism,²¹ the aural tropes of “Tintern Abbey” frame present experience as collectively felt. In this way, “Tintern Abbey” addresses the social division emblematized in the abbey’s landscape by an extended removal of affective significance from its visual details—which is not to say


that Wordsworth callously disregards the scene. I mean only that he makes the aural register paramount, choosing to experience the landscape through a sensory channel less aesthetically polluted than the eye of mechanistic philosophy and picturesque association. Ultimately, Wordsworth links the poem’s vision to unisons of chant that happen to have a legacy in the collective rites associated with the abbey. Through a description of the poem’s aural texture in this way, one can account for the dominant movement or “action” of “Tintern Abbey,” in which a “landscape made significant to a savage eye is displaced by one constructed for the social ear.”

By focusing on the abbey’s “aural inscription” in the poem rather than its absence by means of visual description, this essay contributes to the development of a critical ear for Wordsworth’s poetry. Prefixes are meaningful here. In a literal sense, sounds, unlike images, cannot be very accurately described in other media for their preservation. Greek rhetoric had no sonic equivalent for ekphrasis; and Latin similarly has no aural synonym to pair with ut pictura poesis. Sound must be physically imprinted or inscribed in the world for its survival, rising when accessed now like a mist seen only by blank mechanical or digital eyes. But the critical ear of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries listened to literature as intently as it read, as Hazlitt’s remarks on Wordsworth’s “chaunt” demonstrate. It listened more carefully

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23 We now have the hybrid “musical ekphrasis” but have had it only a short time. See Siglind Bruhn, *Musical Ekphrasis: Composers Responding to Poetry and Painting* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2000).
24 Hazlitt finely distinguishes different modes of poetic chant, alluding to the title of the volume in which “Tintern Abbey” appears: “There is a chaunt in the recitation
to sounds real and imagined, if only because memory was beginning to reassert a vital aesthetic importance, and there was no recording eye to remember for it. Nor would Wordsworth have desired one, given his antipathy toward the mechanical and divisive uses to which the eye was being put throughout European civilization. Our own long technological century has suffered (and much indicates that we continue to do so) under a master trope of the all-seeing eye, a state of affairs that Wordsworth can be seen as having warned us of.

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As the first histories of monastic chant appeared in England in the 1770s, concerns simultaneously arose over discord sown by poor chant practices in Anglican communions. Such concerns were accompanied by demands for a more streamlined and unifying style of vocal music. By the 1790s, reformers within the Anglican Church had begun lamenting that the “manner of performing parochial music…is become an object of disgust, instead of rational delight.”25 Chant practice, to the ears of some, had developed into shouting matches at many Anglican services, evocative of that “confusion of tongues…at the building of the tower of Babel.”26 Such practices were (supposedly)

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both of Coleridge and Wordsworth, which acts as a spell upon the hearer and disarms their judgment…Coleridge’s manner is more full, animated, and varied; Wordsworth’s more equable, sustained, and internal. The one might be termed more dramatic, the other more lyrical.” See William Hazlitt, The Fight and Other Writings, ed. Tom Paulin and David Chandler (New York: Penguin, 2005), 260.

26 Ibid., 172.
calculated to shew the abilities of the singer, and the extravagant flights of the composer, but nothing farther. The running long divisions of notes upon the most unemphatic words, which is frequently the case, breaks the connection of every sentence thus abused, and leaves the congregation destitute of a single idea of piety or “edification unto godliness.” In those anthems...fugue tunes are often introduced, which...whenever they are connected with poetry, they create such manifest confusion that the sense of the poetry is swallowed up.

This “abuse” of the psalms by complicated parts for organ and voice, resulting in untutored cacophony and ostentation, is referred to elsewhere as a “vile prostitution of church music”; and

There are many in our congregations, who seem to think they sing best, when they sing loudest. You may see them often strain themselves with shouting, till their faces are as red as scarlet. The worst singers commonly offend this way. A bad coarse voice quite out of tune is to be heard above all, and will take the lead in the congregation: And whenever a number of such meet together in their shouting humor, they put all into confusion...So they entirely defeat the end of singing.

Others began to write of the need to “restore this [chant] in its primitive purity,” envisioned as a simple unison in which each individual voice melds to form an

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27 Ibid., 185.
29 Ibid., 100–01.
indistinct totality. Clergy, “if they could be brought to lead the congregation in a Musical service which all might partake in,” could easily dissuade parishioners from the desire “to assume a distinct share to themselves,” for a “common chant is easily attainable by the ear; and...would soon become familiar to the audience.” Crucially, a “chant of this kind might not only become congregational, but national.”

This was no stripping of iconic altars but a stripping away of ornamental sound in order to restore the essential poetry of worship. Just as Richard Eastcott was aware of the psalms as “poetry” when sung, Robert Wharton alludes with some compression to the equivalence of the sounds of instrumental music, chanting, and lyric poetry:

“The finest and most effective piece of sacred music in the world [is] the miserere of Allegri...sung by thirty voices so exactly modulated, so correctly attuned, now increasing, now diminishing their force so perfectly together, as to resemble, but far to excel, the finest or most accurately tuned Aeolian harp [.]”

Singing “with obstreperous roar or affected efforts at the intricacies of execution” was seen by observers to subdue or even disregard the submerged spiritual meaning, the poetry, of chant.

The situation was urgent enough by 1790 that the Bishop of London devoted a substantial portion of his annual address to subordinate clergy to the topic. He traced

31 Ibid., 10.
33 Ibid., 3.
the root of the problem to attempts by local parishes and school choirs to emulate the complex harmonies of the psalmodies sung in “Cathedrals, Royal Chapels, &c.” Noting the political implications of chant reform, Bishop Proteus stressed that the uniformity of the chanted service “is of more real and national and practical importance than even those sublime and elaborate compositions of our great masters,” while also insisting that the “plain, natural, soothing melody of our best old Psalm Tunes…gives more warmth to the devotions of a Christian congregation than all the ingenious and learned contrivance of complex counterpoint.”

Communion in place of division is the Bishop’s goal, one shared by the York minister who advises a congregation to sing “in a voice rather depressed below than raised above its common strength,” so that no individual would “be heard above the rest of his neighbors.”

The reformers’ idea of chant as “not only…congregational but national” was ecumenical in spirit in its promotion of the simpler chant employed by dissenting sects, which in practice was a plain unison of different voices kept within a middle octave that allowed every congregant to chant the service. “Tintern Abbey,” exemplary of Wordsworth’s attempts to breathe new life into the lyric, shares a rhetorical emphasis on shared passion and experience through poetic song with the period’s animated discussion of chant reform.

Recent attempts to discuss how Wordsworth’s ideas about established religion seek the “frame of social being” have focused primarily on the late work, in which

35 [Robert Wharton], An Essay on Psalmody, 5.
those connections are more explicit. The 1805 Prelude would seem to indicate misgivings about the Anglicanism of Wordsworth’s youth. Further, Wordsworth’s sympathy for the anti-Anglicanism that spread throughout Wales in the 1790s, when to be “Welsh was not to be Celt vs. Saxon but Nonconformist vs. Anglican” lends a paradoxically radical valence to his more generally nationalist participation in the English re-invention of Welsh tradition. Yet, Wordsworth’s appropriation of dissenters’ languages of “enthusiasm” at moments of poetic transport is not at all straightforward. All of this suggests that critics have a sense young Wordsworth was influenced by religious discourse; but it is also clear he derived from much of it an ambivalence concerning the divisive sociopolitical aims to which it could be put. Doctrinally, the concerns of Anglophone Christianity Wordsworth may have been most receptive to were emergent aesthetic ones. Moreover, a burgeoning music history with strong foundations in medieval sources may have offered Wordsworth a fresh resource. “Tintern Abbey” may show Wordsworth’s alliance with a renewed

37 See Ben Ross Schneider, Jr., Wordsworth’s Cambridge Education (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 112–63, which allies Wordsworth’s early radicalism with a contemporary revolt at Cambridge against oaths of loyalty to the Anglican Church.
aesthetic fascination, culminating later in the Oxford and Pre-Raphaelite movements, with the *fons et origo* of chant reform in Britain: the medieval church.

Tintern Abbey was endowed in 1131 by Walter de Clare, Lord of Chepstow, as part of a twelfth-century wave of Cistercian settlement in Wales. The sounds of the daily chants at Tintern were distinguished from the outset by their resistance to musical practices enjoined by the Catholic Church. At the time of Tintern’s establishment, the Cistercian order, itself only several decades old, was undertaking controversial reformatory of Gregorian chant. Cistercians interpreted sixth century Benedictine strictures to specify that only the small handful of hymns composed by St. Ambrose in the fourth century should be used in the liturgies of monastic

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orders. This interpretation was informed by struggle against aspects of chant practice that had begun to characterize services in Benedictine monasteries during the eleventh century: the rapid proliferation of chant sequences added to the liturgies of feast days for newly canonized saints; the increasing use of complex, non-scriptural texts in chant to vary the repertoire; and the polyphonic advances in style that were extending chant practice beyond the vocal capacity of the average monk.

Bernard of Clairvaux, founding theologian of the Cistercian order and instigator of medieval chant reform, harshly criticizes such elaborate stylization. “What,” he asks,

is this lawless license that joins contradictories together, and by trespassing on natural boundaries, imposes disharmony on unity and inflicts injury upon nature? It is indeed clearer than daylight that that kind of chant is offensively and irregularly composed which sinks so low that it cannot be heard as it ought to be, or soars so high that it cannot be sung: for it ought to be such that in its lower notes a person can hear it, and in its higher notes that a person can sing it.

Where the most voices converge, a purer sound resides. Such convergence should be preserved from ostentatious extremes of highs or lows that annihilate religious feeling.

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by shaping an individual’s identity separate from communion with the deity or the monastic collective. The similarity to later eighteenth century Anglican reform is striking: the “vanity of a few persons who set themselves up to perform what their neighbors cannot” is, in the eighteenth century as it was in the twelfth, an obstacle “preventing much the greater part of the congregation from uniting.”

The most well known account of medieval chant in England and Wales available to Wordsworth was Charles Burney’s groundbreaking *History of Music.* It refers to Bernard’s chant reforms a number of times, mentioning several key sources on Cistercian chant polemics. For instance, Burney lingers on the Benedictine Walter of Evesham’s thirteenth century *De Speculatione Musices* and its depiction of “inflexions of the voice in almost every species of interval by a single character, and groops [sic] of notes by a single term of art.” Burney footnotes Evesham’s chant notations, which “seem more florid than appear in missals of the same period,” with a reference to Cistercian chant reform: “Here we have *appoggiaturas* [grace notes that

extend the time signature of a given note]. It was perhaps during the use of all the preceding quirks and refinements in canto fermo [polyphonic organum chant], that such offense was given to John of Salisbury, Pope John XXII, and other grave personages of those times.”

Burney quotes John of Salisbury:

“The rites of religion,” says he, “are now profaned by music: and it seems as if no other use were made of it than to corrupt the mind by wanton modulations, effeminate inflexions, and frittered notes and periods[…] sometimes descending to the bottom of the scale, sometimes mounting to the summit; now softening and now enforcing the tones, repeating passages, and mixing in such a manner the grave sounds with the more grave, and the acute with the most acute, that the astonished and bewildered ear is unable to distinguish one voice from another.”

The accusations are essentially Bernard’s. Additionally, Burney paraphrases Denis the Carthusian, a fifteenth century mystic, whose depiction in Burney’s work demonstrates how Cistercian ideas about chant reform had been absorbed into later ecclesiastical culture:

[Denis] was called the Extatic Doctor, [and] gives a pleasant idea of Discant [counterpoint] from an ancient life of St. Sebastian, in

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manuscript, where it is compared to the curls, folds, and flounces in a female dress. It hides the meaning of the words, as false ornaments conceal the shape and natural beauty of a human figure. St. Antoninus, archbishop of Florence, in the fifteenth century distinguishes this kind of singing entirely from the Ambrosian and Gregorian chant; and says that he was unable to discover how it was able to gain admission into divine service.51

One can easily read the derision in Denis’ description through the glow of Burney’s period preference for the “pleasant idea of Discant.”

This should be seen as part of the context for the 1800 “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*” that describes a common language obscured by recent unhealthy developments in poetic practice. Wordsworth chooses in *Lyrical Ballads* “subjects from common life, and…language near to the real language of men” for reasons of secular communion.52 Careful attention to the natural workings of perception and emotion must inform the poet’s language. Like the Anglican chant reformers, Wordsworth’s concern is with the preservation of a collective unity; his concern for naturally expressive emotion is shared with them (as with St. Bernard). Robert Wharton claimed, “all complex air[s] whatever, all fugue[s], and all those wretched compositions which are an affectation of fugue…are the utter destruction of all feeling and expression…and the least suitable to the intention of psalm-singing.”53 That

intention is the joining of the self to others in worship through a shared emotional experience. This same identification is a feature too of the period’s aesthetic writings on ruined abbeys, whose theorists manifested “assimilation, whereby [artists could] reconstruct the pleasures of the monks by, quite literally, adopting their point of view.”

Expressing something other than the unique feelings of the poet, Wordsworth views his proposed reforms as an effort to focus intensively on the collective passions of humanity as well as the pleasure derived from verse. For Wordsworth, the determined method for effecting such re-distribution of the passions was through a metered selection of ordinary language learned from a cultural experience defined by its quality of being closer to nature than to art. The delicate preservation in this distributive process of a shared state, which aptly emerges as shared pleasure from a state of qualified and simple “enjoyment” at the individual level, depends upon both a wariness of expressive artifice (the pleasure of ordinary communion is already overbalanced) and a heightened attention to the similitude of the reader’s and poet’s minds. Wordsworth goes on to formulate this belief in starker terms. Cautioning his readers not to resort to conventional judgment of the plainness of Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth suggests that the poems are comprehensible insofar as the reader assumes the part of the poet in a state of emotive and intellectual mutuality: the “Reader ought never to forget that he is himself exposed to the same errors as the Poet, and perhaps in a much greater degree.”

55 Prose Works, 2:152.
“Preface” often refer to the greater degree of the poet’s abilities, obscuring this interactive aspect of Wordsworth’s poetics, which posits the perceived “error” of plainness as precisely that quality of the average reader’s experience that the poet is aiming for.

For the Cistercians the “most infuriating aspect of the [Benedictine] Order’s contemporary musical practices was the excessive range of the chant, which was excoriated…as a violation of *natura* itself.” 56 Discordance was cast out from the natural order of the middle ages, just as the overblown rhetoric of much 18th century poetry had no place in Wordsworth’s poetic theory. Instead, the cadences of Wordsworth’s “real language of men” supply the fount for a stream of naturally represented feeling distributed across a network of minds through poetic language. That which appears to exceed natural sensation in Wordsworth’s poetic theory (an “overbalance of pleasure” in the reader) is the result of collective effort, which forges, like monastic chant, a natural conduit to metaphysical sensation, and draws its power in return from that common nature or spirit perceived to surge through all things.

The idea that the poet might imagine this shared state as a collective chant emerges more fully when one considers that the word “chant” or a cognate of it appears in Wordsworth’s poetry at least 58 times, from his first published book through to the 1850 *Prelude*. 57 On multiple occasions, moreover, Wordsworth made

later revisions to his poems by working in a reference to chant.\textsuperscript{58} To examine only a handful of direct, unrevised examples that bookend the composition of “Tintern Abbey” is to glimpse that poem as a stage in Wordsworth’s imaginative use of chant. In \textit{Descriptive Sketches} (1793), the swelling chorus is the world at sunset, which “Mounts thro’ the nearer mist the chaunt of birds, / And talking voices and the low of herds, / The bark of dogs, the drowsy tinkling bell, / And wild-wood mountain lutes of saddest swell.”\textsuperscript{59} The syntax here expands the chant to include both human and animal kingdoms in its first three clauses, before ending on a nod to their accompaniment by “wild wood” and “mountain.” The sweetbriar of “The Waterfall and the Eglantine,” added to \textit{Lyrical Ballads} in 1800, addresses its neighboring cataract by again invoking birds’ chant in an argument for the mutuality of being.\textsuperscript{60} Finally, Wordsworth constructs an analogy in “The Solitary Reaper” (c. 1805) that contrasts birdsong with that of the Highland girl, but compares himself with a group of people under its sway: “No Nightingale did ever chaunt / So sweetly to reposing bands / Of Travellers in


\textsuperscript{59} Wordsworth, \textit{Descriptive Sketches}, 88.

some shady haunt.”\textsuperscript{61} In this poem, the reaper’s solitude is emphasized repeatedly at the outset, but the poet draws closer to his analogous “bands” as he draws the “overflowing” human chant into his heart, at one point declaiming to the imagined group: “Will no one tell me what she sings?”

In the 1805 \textit{Prelude}, Wordsworth’s fascination with the chanting of birds merges with the monkish context of “Tintern Abbey.” The childhood “spots of time” that Wordsworth accesses during his Cambridge years include more birdsong:

\begin{quote}
for the better part

Of two delightful hours we stroll’d along

By the still borders of the misty Lake,

Repeating favorite verses with one voice,

Or conning more; as happy as the birds’

That round us chaunted.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Again, Wordsworth is joined with others through an imitation of chant. But earlier, Wordsworth observed a bird, broken from its flock, perched in the ruined nave of Furness Abbey. This passage is worth quoting in full:

\begin{quote}
With whip and spur we by the Chauntry flew

In uncouth race, and left the cross-legg’d Knight,

And the Stone-Abbot, and that single Wren

Which one day sang so sweetly in the Nave

Of the old Church, that, though from recent showers
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{61} Wordsworth, \textit{Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems}, 184.  
\textsuperscript{62} Wordsworth, \textit{The Thirteen-Book Prelude}, 176.
The earth was comfortless, and, touch’d by faint
Internal breezes, sobbings of the place,
And respirations, from the roofless walls
The shuddering ivy dripp’d large drops, yet still,
So sweetly ‘mid the gloom the invisible Bird
Sang to itself, that there I could have made
My dwelling-place, and liv’d for ever there
To hear such music.\(^\text{63}\)

The bleakness of the scene somehow begins to revitalize it for Wordsworth, who juxtaposes the “respirations” of the flood’s condensing with subtle mimicry of the bird’s chant. Breath, in both instances, gives life to the place. Although the bird is expressly invisible and singing “to itself,” its music obliges the poet to linger over a scene he would otherwise find distasteful, and to contemplate joining the wren in the choir stalls. A visible overflow gives way before the stronger attraction of an audible one—an attraction bound inextricably to a desire for communion through song.

In just this sense the 1800 “Preface” inhabits common ground with both Romantic-era polemics on chanted psalmody and a tradition of reformed chant represented by the history of Tintern Abbey’s musical practice. The interactive aspect of Wordsworth’s poetic theory, along with its fullest achievement in *Lyrical Ballads* in “Tintern Abbey,” shares with Cistercian and Anglican chant reform a profound conviction about the effects of aesthetic theory and practice on the viability of a

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fulfilling common existence. What the physical site of the abbey provides the poet, in addition to a de-politicized alternative to the nationalist rhetoric of the Anglican chant reformers, is a place whose various symbolic resonances gather together a subject that might, through the sound of chant embodied in language, test this hypothesis about poetry and society.

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Wordsworth’s experiment with the power of poetic sound in “Tintern Abbey” manifests itself initially in aural tropes that work to break down the boundary of the individual poetic self that feels its separation from external reality.64 Sight at first appears to contend with sound for perceptual dominance in the first verse paragraph of “Tintern Abbey” as Wordsworth sifts rapidly through memories according to their attachments to distinct auditory and visual phenomena: “again I hear / These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs / With a sweet inland murmur. – Once again / Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs” (2-5). But the first mental registry of the scene occurs through an “inland murmur,” with the apposite visuality of “Once again / Do I behold” extenuated by the priority of the babbling Wye. The initial sound of the river provides an anchor for memory as it spreads up either side of the valley slopes finally to take in the cliff tops and the panorama of the landscape. Moreover, the visual appearance of the steeps materializes only briefly before vision becomes figurative

and internalizes, “impress[ing] / Thoughts of more deep seclusion” (6-7). Internalized vision swiftly transitions outward once more by means of another aural trope, as the cliffs “connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky” (7-8).

The syntactic uncertainty here as to whether the cliffs link the landscape to the “quiet of the sky,” or whether it is effectively the poet’s effort to shed visual impressions that creates the link, seems to me unresolvable. But it is an instructive impasse. Empirical details in “Tintern Abbey” dissolve into one another and become difficult to distinguish from the subjective layers of meaning attached to them after their initial sensory perception. Sound travels faster than light in the fictional universe of the poem, creating a lag in visual perception as the scene materializes through sound. Accordingly, this ambiguity is nestled within the “quiet” sky and “murmuring” valley. Sight of the cliffs not only acquires a metaphorical layer of “vision” in the word’s vatic sense; it does so by merging with the “quiet” that both catalyzes vision and serves as its terminus, creating a confusion of ends and means that provides the background of aural tropes for the poem’s initial enunciations. An awareness of this ambiguity transforms the modest decibels of the scene into the initial ground for an exteriorized self that will steadily expand in the poem, just as the slight “murmur” of the river begins the poem’s inward gathering of memory into a chanted chorus. Descriptive detail blurs by way of an internalized vision that then extrudes upon the landscape, a process closed at both ends by tropes of sound. Vision in “Tintern Abbey” is soaked through by sound. This invisible saturation of its first lines with sound establishes the poem’s paradigmatic outward movement of a visual consciousness as it attempts to shift sensory registers.
This process works concentrically as well. We can observe it closing the first verse paragraph in precisely the way it began. As the poet “view[s] /…plots of cottage-ground” (10-11), blurring empirical vision admits no external distinctions in the “orchard-tufts / Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits / Among the woods and copses lose themselves” (11-13). Aurality substitutes for the sight of forms running together in the unripe landscape, figured like the sky’s quiet as a lack of “disturb[ance]” (14). Lest we forget the auditory perception that contextualizes the poem’s visual prospect, the “silent” landscape is compelled once more to vertical connection. Traces of the landscape’s inland murmer drift, disturbance-free, into the quiet of the sky:

again I see

These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
With some uncertain notice

(15-19)

Again, details resist individuation; description becomes more impersonal. Hedgerows are barely noticed before becoming “hardly” themselves, and the lines of “wood run wild” into a blur, matched linguistically by the disagreement of plural “farms” converging around a single “door.” Once more, this transformation of the visual seeks its end in figures of sound: “wreathes of smoke” compound the process that blends
external with internal vision, blurring the horizon line further as “sportive wood” combests soundlessly to air and becomes atmosphere.

Sound in “Tintern Abbey” can be designedly inconspicuous when troped as silence or quiet. As a result, a quality of picturesque description and the nostalgic gaze of the meditative eye have distracted from the poem’s soundscape. Certainly the panorama of the abbey and its environs could be viewed à la mode, its dimension and contour all but fixed for Wordsworth by the cultural tensions underpinning English fascination with the Celtic past. Renewed interests in rural landscape, native spirituality, and medieval ruins, all characteristic preoccupations of the Welsh cultural revival of the late eighteenth century, were partly promulgated by English tourists in the region. But it is more accurate to say that Wordsworth’s nostalgic vision at this moment is inextricable from the new use of poetic sound and impersonal voice to which that vision leads him. Sound in “Tintern Abbey” encircles its visual reality – a scene steeped in symbolic representations of the social divisions of the late 1790s and reflective of the poet’s own ambivalent political feelings. The poem’s imagined presence and absence of sounds encircle and subdue Wordsworth’s visual field, a circumscriptive formal practice that arises from the very frustration with the landscape that lends “Tintern Abbey” both its social character and its historical awareness of political division.

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65 Such tensions provide the general premise for Alan Liu’s discussion of Romantic historicism in “Wordsworth and Subversion,” 55–100.
Like the theory of poetry found in the 1800 “Preface” and the poetic reforms that theory imagined, “Tintern Abbey” exemplifies a Romantic parallel to the reformed chant tradition associated with its setting. In this way it is possible to understand how Wordsworth’s sense of history might not be exclusively defined by its visual appearance, but may subsist instead within the inconspicuous aurality of a poem like “Tintern Abbey.” Tracing any definitive set of political allegiances in “Tintern Abbey” is difficult precisely because the poem’s aurally fixated poetic voice transforms the political and cultural divisions contained within the landscape. To this effect, descriptions of the poem’s contested setting nestle within tropes that resemble the effects of the abbey’s communally produced music. As sonic trope combines with lyric enunciation to approximate the embodiment of a collection of voices in “Tintern Abbey,” we observe the expansion of voice to chorus. Wordsworth reins in excessive ornamentation of sound through a series of paradoxes and negative formulas that subdue the poem’s imagery, marking the point at which the singular lyric voice becomes an expression of collectivity in the poem. The complex triple negative construction of “Though absent long, / These forms of beauty have not been to me, / As is a landscape to a blind man’s eye” (23-25) is the most artfully condensed cancellation of vision in the poem. In just seven beats Wordsworth moves from the absence of scenic elements to their mental counterpart in his remembered experience, prefiguring the negative formulations that follow: “unremembered pleasure” and “no trivial influence” (31-33); “nameless, unremembered acts” (35-36); and “all this unintelligible world” (40-41). These epithets describe with relentless negation the mental image of the landscape and its effect on the poet. By doing so they draw
attention away from the landscape’s visual properties and towards the sound of the poem’s language, a quality of sound that one might imagine constituting “landscape to a blind man’s eye.”

A still more complete connection of interiority to that which exists outside of it emerges at one of those moments in the poem that Potkay has described as “indefinite and subordinate to the rhythms, alliteration, and vowel music of verse.”67 The poet recalls sitting “in lonely rooms, and mid the din / Of towns and cities” (26-27), marking a divide between the individual and the collective that quickly erodes. The self, reminded of more raucous collective sound in the London streets, soon diffuses even more emphatically than it did in the poem’s initial verse paragraph:

Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

(46-50)

The sound of the present scene intrudes upon memory, and alienation dissipates. The quiet confines of “lonely rooms” mute the external “din,” and the somnambulant eye dims its literal vision in the presence of a more powerful “harmony” that hushes, subdues, and transfigures it. Wordsworth uses morphology metaphorically to approximate the inconspicuous sound of a collective vocal utterance: a series of

negated words and phrases grammatically revoke their images even as they continue to denote on the page. Sound attends so closely on sense that both virtually disappear behind a metaphor of privative grammar (“unremembered,” “unintelligible,” “nameless,” “no…influence,” “almost suspended,” “unprofitable”) until the stanza suddenly elicits a final unison of sonic with semantic “harmony.” The catachresis of the seeing, sleeping eye made harmoniously quiet, phrases and concepts that are difficult to visualize or conceive of, is a rhetorical nod to the passage’s grammatical negations. So much grammatical subtlety culminates at last in the first-person plural as a figure of the poetic “I” effaced by its own emergence into collective existence. At the same time, this stripping of sound and sense to an expressive minimalism is explicitly joyful, especially at that point where expression can no longer be individually distinguished.

Still, Wordsworth’s emplacement of topographic specificity within an imagined framework of sound in “Tintern Abbey” has generated critiques of a “binary logic” in the poem that signifies revulsion from the scene. This critique posits a “Cartesian problematic” in Wordsworth’s attempts to sublimate an industrialized landscape as pastoral and thereby construct “a reality that is self-contained and perspicuous without reference to the observed scene or to the observer.”68 This ideological formulation of poetic vision cites its tendency for inward, transcendent expansion at the expense of the visual (which in this account of the poem is conflated

68 Levinson, “Insight and Oversight,” 38 and 40–41. Levinson defines the false binary in “Tintern Abbey” as the “narrator’s governing association of auditory stimuli with perception of what is (the given material world), and of vision with creative formulation (intellectual life),” 40.
with the historical), and Wordsworth for this reason avoids any interaction with the social reality of the abbey itself. As I have argued, though, transcendence in “Tintern Abbey” is directed outward rather than inward. Tropes of simple, unornamented sound, or else of silence, far from abstracting a solipsistic poet from awareness of the abbey’s present inhabitants, are actually a kind of imaginative engagement with the presence of others within the scene.

Social interaction in the medieval abbey would have been determined by two factors: the solitude of Cistercian abbeys, which were purposefully established in wastes and wilds beyond urban reach; and the presence in chapel services of members of the native population from the local countryside. Because Cistercians did not accept tithes or pilgrimage offerings and refused ownership of their own abbeys, forfeiting manorial rents as well, they relied upon the agricultural labor of lay brethren residing upon Cistercian estates for communal sustenance. These *conversi*, as the monks called them, chanted the same liturgical texts as the choir monks, the choir stalls for the two groups being divided only by a screen. This inclusion of the laity in


72 See ibid., 149–188, esp. 152 and 157, for a detailed account of the complex relationship between *conversi* and Cistercian monks. See also Christopher Page, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 169.
shared chant intermingled a rural, native spirituality with the foreign traditions of the monks, and vice versa, resulting in the development of a Welsh cultural identity neither wholly Celtic nor Catholic yet both. With a liturgy designed to reflect the vocal talent of the average monk, the carefully limited proportions of each voice and the repertoire as a whole worked to knit the monks’ individual subjectivities into a collective that included the Welsh Britons of the surrounding region. Moreover, like the reforms of psalmody envisioned by Anglicans in the 1790s, chanting at Tintern Abbey was meant to approach the expression of an order still higher and more complex than that of the monastic collective.\footnote{John Stevens, \textit{Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance, and Drama, 1050–1350} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 296.}

While Wales “remained a footnote to Celtic researches in the 1760s” compared to Ireland and Scotland, the efforts of figures such as Thomas Percy, Charlotte Brooke, Thomas Wharton, and others lent aesthetic significance to the intermingling of cultures taking place through tourism in British “fringe” areas like the Wye Valley.\footnote{Nick Groom, \textit{The Making of Percy’s Reliques} (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 72.} Their commentaries on the Celtic and Norman strains within the English literary and musical past provided the late eighteenth century with a historiography that depended to a large extent on a literary cultural politics of “complex \textit{entrelacement}” between neighboring (as well as colonizing and native) cultures.\footnote{Philip Connell, “British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry in Later Eighteenth Century England,” \textit{The Historical Journal} 49 (2006): 189.} Philip Connell has argued that “Celtic revivalism offered a vision of cultural identity that was effectively decoupled from the prescriptive authority of historical rights” that

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Words and Music in the Middle Ages: Song, Narrative, Dance, and Drama, 1050–1350} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 296.
\end{itemize}
defined the reigning political debates of the time.\footnote{Ibid., 191.} This resulted in a “depoliticized patriotism.”\footnote{S.J. Connolly, “Varieties of Britishness: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the Hanoverian State,” in \textit{Uniting the Kingdom? The Making of British History}, ed. Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (London: Routledge, 1995), 200. Quoted in Connell, “British Identities,” 191.} Wordsworth’s fixation on sound in “Tintern Abbey” during the revival of British interest in Celtic song suggests that his urging of political division towards aesthetic union participated in this dual historiographical tendency, which traced the unifying strands of living cultural tradition in order to glance periodically backwards at points of revealed community.

* * *

Recognizing what the sound of “Tintern Abbey” actually is, I think, rests finally on a reader’s willingness to accept two conjectures about the poem: (1) its speaker, at the point of its subsumption into a “we,” is imagined to be pre-modern (which the severest critiques of nostalgic vision in the poem were the first to acknowledge and discuss at length); and (2) Wordsworth constructs this non-individualistic, pre-modern self through a treatment of sound that resonates both with what his contemporaries knew about chant reform at the abbey and with his own poetic practice.

Given its interest in the shared expression of impersonality, “Tintern Abbey” has something in common with that poetic self \textit{qua} an example of the generally human capacity for cognizing the supramundane identified with late medieval
authorship. Fuller attention to the tone and detailed texture of Wordsworth’s medievalism in “Tintern Abbey” suggests that the poem participates in something other than the ideological containment it has indicated to some. Too often a Burkean medieval pastoralism that connotes the fracture of party politics in Wordsworth’s day is taken as a catchall summary of the poet’s conservative sympathies. But Burke’s organically constituted “antient liberties,” derived not from a collectively forged constitution but from the “principles of true politicks [which] are those of morality enlarged,” do not map well onto the medievalism of “Tintern Abbey.” Rather, the insistent lyric “I” of “Tintern Abbey,” especially in the second half of the poem, avoids the naturalization of personal attributes and convictions, presenting itself as merely one conduit through which rolls the larger, collectively composed sound imagined by the poet. “Tintern Abbey” describes the landscape only insofar as it affords the surfaces for receiving and echoing back to the poet an imagined sound, which works in the process to degrade physical boundaries between poet and landscape. The “I” of “Tintern Abbey” substitutes a shared cultural practice for individual political commitment, and as a result is not the empirical “I” of unique feeling and personal experience that we normally identify with Romantic poetry.

A brief hinge-like passage in the middle of the poem offers yet another instance of vision catalyzed by the power of sound. Now, however, it does so with an emphasis on establishing the shared, communal dimension of sound:

If this

Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft,
In darkness, and amid the many shapes
Of joyless day-light; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(50-8)

Any expression of joylessness or self-doubt derived from the visual chaos of empirical detail is occluded when that reality internalizes as an apposite “fretful stir /
Unprofitable.” This subjective re-orientation is marked by the poet’s heartbeat, which substitutes an audible rhythm for the “many shapes / Of joyless daylight,” a striking phrase that, on first reading, seems uncharacteristic for Wordsworth. The phrase expresses horror of the natural world in its visible form; yet it is of a piece with the poem’s dynamic re-orientation of visual to aural experience by way of dramatic internal processes. As the dim shapes of visual experience press on the sensitive heart, the narrated effect is one of rhythmic transference, as visible shapeliness blurs to a “stir” and a “fever” before seeming to lose all distinction and sync in with the beats.
they hang upon. The heart, with its rhythmic force humming in the inner ear, is capable of reshaping an unpleasant experience into a profound one. Immediately, the fretful stir is expunged and re-distributed over the shapes of the landscape in direct address. Wordsworth turns, not physically in order to see, but in spirit towards the same murmuring stream whose sounds catalyzed the poem. Sight is exchanged for sound. The poem as sound, the poem as aural recreation of the scene, seeks to join the poet with something external, something so large and overwhelming that it can only be addressed “in spirit” as an anthropomorphic abstraction. The poet’s voice is striving to become a choral voice by “turning” or troping itself to the polyvocal river Wye, whose sound emanates from no single point or fixed source. In this way the aural encircles and subsumes the visual; the poet’s voice enacts the internalization of the scene and its transformation into a “vision” of the scene, which is then projected out as the poem, a poem that speaks with and for the collectivity of a choir or chorus.

At the same time that Wordsworth’s language displays the emptying of the self into the world, we should recognize taking shape again that same looped pattern traced earlier that is the atomized heart of the poem: empirical details blur as the poet’s sight becomes poetic vision, which subsequently diffuses across the external world through sound. Individual perceptions and external physical properties, initially distinct, quickly combine to form an unstable permeability sought by the poetic voice in “Tintern Abbey.” All of this culminates in aural tropes that represent the transfiguration of singular emotive states into collective or externalized sound. In this way “doubt,” like “hope” in the next, penultimate section of the poem, is not a formally psychologized containment of what might otherwise be a social commitment
or a utopian longing. Rather, the status of doubt as an individual expression of those terminally incomplete internal states that only “half-create, / And…perceive” (107-108) designates to it the role of an expressive index of the externalizing process that links poetic voice in “Tintern Abbey” with its imagined chorus. Sound is, in the poem, the mode of perception that mediates the sense of one, felt as diminished half-creation, among many that complete it.

These expressive indices signal that the enunciations of lyric voice are in fact so far from being strategies of containment that they are the very preconditions of social existence. One need only consult how the power of sound, in its function of distributing individual emotion across the landscape, is made still more explicit by the poem’s famous developmental narrative. Appetitive youth grows, more mature, to “dare to hope” (66) as the “sounding cataract” (77) of immature perception becomes “The still, sad music of humanity, / Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue” (92-94). The narration of progress to maturity as degrees of sound, from the chaotic cataract of singular appetite to the still, subdued quality of the collective music achieved in the poem, equates poetic maturity with collective voice. Intensive sensation and expression mount in “Tintern Abbey” to connect back ultimately to the aural orientation that opens the poem. The hopeful perception of the “spirit, that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought, / And rolls through all things” (101-103) again echoes with distant (perhaps unconscious) rhyme and figured motion those initial murmuring “waters, rolling from their mountain springs” (3). Only through sound, then, is Wordsworth able “to recognize / In nature” (108-109) and “in the mind of man” (100) “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply
“interfused” (96-97). “Tintern Abbey” depicts collective participation in an understated vocal utterance, an utterance that mimics a perceived unity in the natural world, so that experience may become once more “all in all” (76) through an unobtrusive harmonic unison of sound with sense, and one with many.

I hope to have demonstrated the extent to which Wordsworth turned to sound in “Tintern Abbey” when the landscape proved too freighted with social division. The interesting parallels of the abbey’s chant tradition with the poetic practice of “Tintern Abbey” has perhaps been overshadowed by the overall power of the poem’s lyricism. On one hand the poem internalizes balladic flux, and its “primary action is the dramatization of a man reading a landscape.” But given its circumscription by sound, topographic imagery in the poem perhaps understandably becomes a hollow ideological formulation of poetic vision when assigned critical priority. Topography for “Tintern Abbey” is a space hollowed out by hallowed song. On the other hand, because “Tintern Abbey” may be the least ballad-like and most lyrical of all the Lyrical Ballads, almost certainly one of those “Other Poems” in the volume’s subtitle, its achievement has allowed critics to view it as a pure form resistant to any historicizing impulse.

80 Levinson, “Insight and Oversight,” 14, links this internalization to the ode, a genre that in her reading grants Wordsworth a license to at once view and idealize, or overview, his surroundings. (For a take on “Tintern Abbey” as a prayer or benediction rather than an ode, see Paul Fry, The Poet’s Calling in the English Ode [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980], 125 and 152.)

Without accounting for the mediating power of the abbey’s music and the shared emotive state that it promoted, such polarizing distinctions perpetuate an “egostical sublime” working in the poem to effect an extreme individuation of lyric voice. As Antony Easthope observes, though, the entire poem is an externalization of subjectivity, an attempt to view that private music as something existing outside the solitary self-as-voice and capable of being not only experienced but expressed by and with others.82 Identifying continuities between the poem’s sonic strategies for diffusion of the singular lyric voice in “Tintern Abbey” and the chanted sound of the historical abbey is one way of understanding Wordsworth’s sense of history in 1798 in terms of sound. These continuities also modify the claim that Romantic poems “are in some way about their own intentionality.”83 It is important in this respect to remember how often the poet in the poem is acted upon: “…the many shapes / …have hung upon the beatings of my heart” (52-5); “Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body” (46-7); “with an eye made quiet… / …We see into the life of things” (48-50). If self-involvement is what Wordsworth seeks to mitigate from his perch above the Wye, he must also be experimenting with methods for casting off the motivated feel of lyric representation, replacing it instead with qualities of voice capable of depicting a nearly hypertrophic empathy consisting of shared emotional states and collective experience.

82 Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), 128–29: “[T]he poem works to situate the reader within the speaker…subject and object, speaker and landscape, are posed as reciprocal terms, one as real as the other.”

These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernum. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it?

—John 6:59–60 (KJV)

I never in all my conversations with him could for a moment feel there was the least justice in calling him insane – he cd always explain his paradoxes satisfactorily when he pleased but to many he spoke so that “hearing they might not hear.”

- John Linnell on Blake, letter to Bernard Barton, April 3, 1830

Uses of sound in Blake’s prophetic poetry have deeper philosophical roots than commentators have acknowledged. The sound of argument or contrariety in Blake has well-known parallels in both the conventions of apocalyptic rhetoric and the actual practices of dissenting congregations that emphasized a tone of contentious debate rather than polite conversation. But prophetic sound in Blake’s work is perhaps more

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essentially a component of his quarrel with the “Loom of Locke whose Woof rages
dire” (J 15:15, E159). In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke
stresses the insignificance of sound in the communicative process, explaining that any
imperfection in words “has its cause more in the *Ideas* they stand for, than in any
incapacity there is in one Sound…in that regard they are all equally perfect.” Locke
makes this statement in order to express dismay that too often sound becomes
detached from meaning and causes interlocutors to confuse it for the real substance of
their speech. We ought to be focused on ideas, whereas too often we get caught up in
sound. Locke singles out the sound of speech, disconnected from easily discernible
thought, as a basis for human conflict and an impediment to progress:

To make Words serviceable to the end of Communication, it is
necessary…that they excite, in the Hearer, exactly the same *Idea*, they
stand for in the Mind of the Speaker. Without this, Men fill one
another’s Heads with noise and sounds; but convey not thereby their
Thoughts, and lay not before one another their *Ideas*, which is the end
of Discourse and Language.5

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Bialostosky and Lawrence D. Needham (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1995), 185–98.

Erdman, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Citations from
*Jerusalem* are given in the text, with Keynes’s alternate order of plates from Chapter 2
cited in brackets where relevant; I cite from Blake’s other work by page numbers only,
which follow “E” to designate Erdman’s edition.


All this noise leads to a pernicious shift in focus from words considered as representations of ideas to words considered in themselves, as sounds:

[W]e should have a great many fewer Disputes in the World, if Words were taken for what they are, the Signs of our Ideas only, and not for Things themselves. For when we argue about Matter, or any the like Term, we truly argue only about the Idea we express by that Sound, whether that precise Idea agree to any thing really existing in Nature, or no.  

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In Jerusalem, however, the perception of eternity and a return to the state of Eden depend upon such disputes. 7 Blake’s poem takes the form of a series of rhetorical exchanges between mental states or perspectives, embodying those perspectives in sound without resolving the truth of the ideas behind them. The absence of an explicit link between verbal sound and mental idea is what sustains the dispute between Los and Albion for over 4000 lines and is, moreover, what makes Jerusalem appear so intransigent to hermeneutic approaches wishing to find some underlying structure to explain Blake’s meaning. Ideas are beside the point in Jerusalem because what little plot the poem has is concerned with a redemptive awakening that seeks to replace the churning thought of the fallen mind with an experience of imaginative reality. “By demonstration, man alone can live,” asserts

6 Ibid., 499.
7 Throughout this essay, I refer to the four principal states of existence defined by Blake, sometimes using their interchangeable terms, which are also used by Blake both across his different works and within them: Eden/Heaven/eternity/eternal life, Beulah/Innocence, Generation/Experience, and Ulro/Hell/eternal death.
Albion at the beginning of the poem as he selfishly turns from the savior, whose “mild song” he refers to as a “Phantom of the over heated brain.” Such a distinction between song and demonstration is, in Blake’s view, a distinction between imaginative action and reasoned argument. This rebuke is directed at a voice that Albion fears will replace thought with an experiential truth figured in sound: “I am in you and you in me, mutual in love divine,” the savior sings, “I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend; / Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me: / Lo! we are One” (J 4:7, 18-20, 24, 28, E146-7). In the poem, Los attempts to restore Albion’s perception of redemptive sound, but he can only do so through a clash of contraries. Just as Los and the other members of the divine family slip into Albion’s spectral sightline, compelling him to wakefulness as they attempt to revive him through sound, Albion’s fallen state forces the human imagination to become what it beholds in a vision of Albion that is a vision of fallen humanity. Consequently, the poem’s salvific characters try to speak Albion’s own language and reason with him. In Blake’s myth, desire imprisoned within nature’s furnace is the corollary of the necessity in Locke’s philosophy for sound to be tethered to demonstrable proofs.8

The main subject of this essay is the relationship in Blake’s work between sound experienced in time—where it is uncomfortably bound to sense and figured by Blake in the binding of the poetic line to demonstrations of preconceived metrical pattern—and uses of sound that seek to break through time and space. Wai-Chee

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8 Cf. the curious claim that “Blake’s attacks on Locke are motivated, in part by a commitment, shared with Locke, to mental liberty,” in Matthew J.A. Green, Visionary Materialism in the Early Works of William Blake: The Intersection of Enthusiasm and Empiricism (Houndmills, Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 17.
Dimock recognized that literary thought “has until quite recently been experienced as a universe only loosely quantified by dates: its temporal distances not strictly measured, keeping at bay the regulative power of the clock and the calendar,” adding that “no one has more to say on this score than Blake.”9 What Dimock means is that the essence of the poetic exists outside of the disciplinary, institutional calendars of church and academy, and that Blake seems to incorporate into his work this tension between the poem in time and its desire to exceed (or succeed) time. I wish to show that Blake makes this point most forcefully in Jerusalem, where the thematic trope of apocalypse and resurrection to eternal life expresses itself through sound. The open spiral shape of the ear Los fashions for the sons of Albion renders it the sense organ that one cannot help but perceive through rather than with.10 The ear provides the least significant barrier, with clear points of ingress and egress, between the outside world and the human imagination that actively creates that exterior.11 Just as “Albion the Vortex of the Dead” draws down into death those figures in Blake’s myth like Milton or Urthona who wish to enter into Generation for redemptive purposes, Los—Urthona’s assumed name in temporal existence—is identified with the vortex of life

10 Cf. “Auguries of Innocence,” in which Blake writes that “We are led to believe a lie / When we see not Thro the eye” (E492).
11 See also Thomas Frosch on The Four Zoas, in The Awakening of Albion: The Renovation of the Body in the Poetry of William Blake (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 104: “The natural ear is no less enclosed and externalized than the eye, and its whorled form images the vortex of fallen perception…Yet it remains an organ of nexus with the world from which we have fallen, and its spiral is described as upwards, rather than downwards, in its projection.”
that leads in the opposite direction, from Newtonian aggregates of matter into the
eternally living human mind (J 48:54, E197).

This redemptive symbolism of the ear is complex. Yet Blake would contend
that it is necessary given the regrettable state of sound after the fall of man generally
and after the fall of the Tower of Babel specifically. When Blake writes enigmatically
of “Nimrod’s tower which I conjecture to have spread over many Countries” (E729),
he is inverting the Old Testament story to explain why even those who speak the same
language, like Blake and his patron Hayley, end up as “corporeal friends [who] are
spiritual enemies” (J 44:10, E193). Instead of accepting that the residents of Babel
were “scattered…abroad” by Jehovah (Gen. 11.8), Blake’s vision of the destruction of
the Tower of Babel results in internal alienation rather than external displacement. The
tower’s builders remain where they were at the laying of its foundations, but with the
inability to communicate with their own neighbors and compatriots. For Blake, the
effects of Babel’s fall manifest themselves internally, within the borders of every state
and the boundaries of each individuated human body. 12 As a result, not only are class
systems evolved and civil wars fought, but a person among peers and colleagues can
find it difficult to be understood. The language of Adam, a language of fulfilled desire
recognizing no distinction between subject and object, is precisely what Blake wishes
to resurrect within and among his readers. This is the language that the cruel God of

12 Cf. V.A. De Luca, Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime
reading of the account of Babel as a “mythical condensation of an event repeated in
many places at the same time.” See pp. 201–5 for De Luca’s more general discussion
of the “submerged presence” of the Tower of Babel in Blake’s myth.
reason perceived uniting mankind, such that “nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do” (Gen. 11.6). As Jerusalem progresses, the injustice of Jehovah’s violent suppression of this language develops as an underlying theme, precisely because the fall of the Tower of Babel, once “spread over many countries,” reinstated borders and metaphorically divided the sound of one person’s thought from another’s, with devastating implications for the ability of the imagination to transform societies and human relationships. The final plates of Jerusalem depict a redeemed babble as Babel, with Albion joining a chorus of eternals who speak and sing in one voice, such that words are objects and objects are perceived as living, created words. What Blake does with sound in Jerusalem is in one sense a critique of the biblical narrative of the Tower of Babel. Because the builders of the Tower of Babel inaugurated their project only as a hedge against the kind of imaginative death and disarray that was eventually imposed upon them, the execution of their punishment as a fragmentation of sound “comes perilously close to confirming the good reasons of the crime it would seek to punish.”13 Jerusalem demonstrates that reunification is possible through imaginative efforts that rest upon a creative manipulation of sound. Against Locke’s plea for rational discourse, Blake uses his prophetic poem to make a case for the generative potential of widening the gap between sound and written word. In another sense, Blake is using his sonic experimentation to point the way forward, in both free verse and perceptual symbolism, to a more edenic poetry that does not depend for its effects on a tight binding of sound and sense.

Locke’s rational clarity champions a collegial tone as the consequence of sound in the service of refined ideas. But this position illustrates, in Blakean terms, the supersession of desire by reason after the fall of the Tower of Babel. Sounds do not only derive their substance from ideas. For Blake, sounds are also the minute particulars of thought—the substance and meaning of thought lies just as much in sound as vice versa. It is a mutuality that speaks to Blake’s identification of “conception” and “execution” in all great artworks (E 637). Mutuality of external and internal reality is, in fact, a principle that informs all sense perceptions for Blake. We read in Jerusalem that “If Perceptive Organs vary: Objects of perception seem to vary: / If the Perceptive Organs close: their Objects seem to close also: / Consider this O Mortal Man! O worm of sixty winters said Los / Consider Sexual Organization & hide thee in the dust” (J 30:55-8, E175). Man considered as man and not a worm—that is, man considered as the sentient animal—depends upon a commonly understood internal experience that rests entirely on the sensual organization of the physical body. This much Blake and Locke would agree upon. They would differ, however, in Blake’s understanding that this mundane description of organic human life can be enhanced (Blake would say “corrected”) by the recognition that desire properly directed causes interiority to work its way outward to shape external reality as well. The senses, particularly the sense of sound that Los represents in Jerusalem, may be imaginatively manipulated through art as both an act of resistance to passive death and a conduit to other states of being. And art itself derives from the very sense perceptions it works upon. This active and creative feedback loop of mutual influence in aesthetic experience, which Blake understood as the highest mental experience
possible for human life, suggests that any perceived subservience in the relationship of substantive thought to the perceptual shell that shapes it contributes to a false understanding of reality. For Blake, Locke is like the specter obstinately stopping its ears against this insight, reveling in its own isolate and muted existence.

Further, a gap between word and thought is necessary in Blake’s myth in order to create the disputes that open up spaces in which mental fight can occur. Locke dismisses intellectual controversies that arise from the reduction of words to unintelligent sound as they become disconnected from the clarity of thought. This is itself a rational demonstration of his state of mind, which Blake would define as Ulro, or eternal death. Locke is insisting on the passivity of the senses, which is an incomprehensible evil in Blake’s metaphysics. What Blake also picks up on in Locke’s insistence that our sense of verbal sound should be subservient to ideas in the mind is the way in which sound is subjugated to sight in Locke’s philosophy. For Blake, Locke’s fallen vision of the world has “deformed us with a despotism of the visual by elevating the connection between eye and mind to the status of a perceptual code of law.”\(^{14}\) This is why, when Blake says elsewhere that “Mental Things alone are real,” he cannot be referring to Locke’s ideas formed from looking with the eye. On the contrary, error “is Burnt up the Moment Men cease to behold it” (E565). As I demonstrate below, mentality in Blake has stronger perceptual links with sound.

Los’s identification with the ear means that sound in Jerusalem has both a fallen and a redeemed aspect. Imaginative effort creates the din that eventually

\(^{14}\) Thomas Frosch, *The Awakening of Albion*, 19.
awakens humanity, yet the imagination must itself harrow hell in order to perform its redemptive work. At the climactic turning point of *Jerusalem*, “Britannia” awakes, seemingly without warning, from her deathly sleep of Ulro upon Albion’s chest. She rises soon after into eternal life, getting a head start on Albion, who will eventually reunite with her in Blake’s vision of eternity:

England a Female Shadow as deadly damps
Of the Mines of Cornwall & Derbyshire lays upon his bosom heavy
Moved by the wind in volumes of thick cloud returning folding round
His loins & bosom unremovable by swelling storms & loud rending
Of enraged thunders. Around them the starry wheels of their Giant Sons
Revolve: & over them the Furnaces of Los & the Immortal Tomb around
Erin sitting in the Tomb, to watch them unceasing night and day And the body of Albion was closed apart from all Nations.

Over them the famishd Eagle screams on boney Wings and around
Them howls the Wolf of famine deep heaves the Ocean black thundering
Around the wormy Garments of Albion: then pausing in deathlike silence

Time was finished! The Breath Divine Breathed over Albion
Beneath the Furnaces & starry Wheels and in the Immortal Tomb

And England who is Brittannia awoke from death on Albions bosom

(J 94:7-20, E254)

Usually unaccounted for in discussions of the poem, Brittannia, not Jerusalem, is the first female emanation to divide from Albion during his fall, causing in turn both Jerusalem and her specter, Vala, to appear subsequently in the heavens (J 32[36]:28, E178). It is fitting therefore that Brittannia should be the first of Albion’s emanations to awake at the last judgment, having been the first to suffer dislocation and derangement of the human form during Albion’s stubborn retreat from eternal reality into the mundane shell of generation. Even more fitting is that Brittannia should awake through a sudden cessation of sound, as her initial division from Albion occurs on the same plate that features Los, Albion’s savior, in the act of forming the physical human ear. Los performs this as a salvific act because he recognizes that the divine vision, perceived with the eye in the state of Generation, may lead one only towards the more hellish state of Ulro. Rapidly unmoored from an edenic perception akin to seeing through rather than with the eye, vision becomes increasingly compromised by reliance on the Urizenic sightline of the physical organ. Reuben, one of the human “sons” or Everymen divided from fallen Albion, stands “Before the Furnaces of Los in a horrible dreamful slumber, / On Mount Gilead looking toward

Gilgal: and Los bended / His Ear in a spiral circle outward; then sent him over Jordan. / The Seven Nations fled before him they became what they beheld” (J 32[36]:11-14, E178). At this point in the poem, the divisions that exist among fallen men and nations are both established and intensified by fallen sight, despite Los’s hopeful fashioning of the ear.

As the hero of Jerusalem, Los/Urthona is chief among the Zoas, which in their edenic state are the “Eternal Senses of Man” (J 32[36]:31). Blake intends for us to recognize that “Los is the ontological ground of the fallen world and the creator of the world in which we live.” Los has also long been identified with sound and the ear, indicating the special role played by sound in man’s perception of eternity. But the implications of this identity for Jerusalem have seldom been pursued. Britannia’s sudden awareness of the background noise of her fallen existence, or else of the startling diminution of it, ought to be regarded as the culmination of Los’s redemptive efforts in Jerusalem. Britannia is “unremovable by swelling storms & loud rending / Of enraged thunders.” Likewise, windy “volumes of thick cloud,” the “Ocean black thundering,” the howls of the “Wolf of famine,” and the screams of a famished eagle all escape her notice. At the same time, careful readers will notice that the scene is similar to one in The Four Zoas, which depicts the body of the bound Orc, whose “nostrils breathe a fiery flame. his locks are like the forests / Of wild beasts there the

17 S. Foster Damon, A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake, rev. ed. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988), 247. Damon merely noted that Los’s “sense is the Ear” without explaining why or how this is the case.
lion glares the tiger & wolf howl there / And there the Eagle hides her young in cliffs & precipices / His bosom is like starry heaven expanded all the stars / Sing round” (E341-2). With Orc as its subtext, Brittannia’s aural environment therefore symbolizes one in which revolutionary energy is already struggling with its constraints, and the inversion of the present order may take place at any moment. These sounds “pausing in deathlike silence” finally deliver Brittannia from hell. The key thematic lesson in the poem’s climax has to do with sound’s relationship to time (“Time was finished!”) and the resulting distinction between fallen sound/time—the impulsive cries of beasts and the soundscape of weather—and eternal sound, which has as little to do with time as possible. In one sudden, soundless beat, Brittannia has effectively found what, in Milton, Blake calls that “Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find / Nor can his Watch Fiends find it” (E136).

The “deathlike silence” that instigates Brittannia’s awakening at the end of Jerusalem, combined with the double caesura that sees time dissolve suspensefully across not only a line break but a paragraph break just before she rises, suggests that the weather and the frightened beasts of Ulro were only intending to pause before renewing their howls. And perhaps they do persist in their racket, only in a lower state of existence than that which the new verse paragraph describes from Brittannia’s awakened perspective. The point being made by Blake is that Brittannia’s sleep could have continued; yet she heard through the cyclical round of weather and the needful whine of the embodied animal selfhood into the deeper resonance of the “Breath Divine.” In Jerusalem, sound never ceases, and silence is never really silent. Rather, sound in one order or state of existence is superseded by sound associated with
another order or state. Much is made of the bewildering synchronicity of Jerusalem, likely influencing W.J.T. Mitchell’s claim with respect to Brittannia’s resurrection that “it is not presented as the direct consequence of any particular creative or revolutionary action. If we read back into the preceding episodes to find the event that has made the difference, we find only ambiguous signals, not efficient causes.”18 But if one reads Blake for sound, the cause in this case is hidden not in plain sight but audibly, in the mounting clamor—which we encounter throughout Jerusalem—through which Brittannia sleeps, until she doesn’t.

The rhythmic chaos of the poem symbolizes the disintegrated sound of the fallen state of intellection, which is only reversed at the end of the poem in its characters’ awakening to the divine conversations that generate reality for all time. Still, Blake continues to express this final apotheosis in the serpentine irregularity of his fourteener and alexandrines, in recognition of the limitations he runs up against expressing his vision through sound. The poem’s final plates, at once astounding and slightly disappointing for this reason, suggest that the chaos of the sounds of Ulro and Generation always underlie the more ordered symphonies of eternity, threatening to overwhelm them in an eternal round that will repeat the cycle of fall and redemption that the prophecy proclaims.

Such prophecy has often fallen on deaf ears. Even sympathetic critics of Blake’s late works have faulted Blake’s “divine babble”19 or, mulling the evident

paradox of Blake’s idiosyncrasy and his desire to reach readers, they have pointed to
the willful “economic aphasia” of a poem as strange in appearance and meaning as
Jerusalem.20 “Jerusalem is harsh,” cautioned Northrop Frye, because the “Lord’s
prayer is not very euphonious when said backwards, and Jerusalem is continually
muttering or howling sinister spells to compel the devil to appear in his true shape.”21
Commentators have joined Frye in excusing Blake’s confusion of tongues as strategic;
one claimed for instance that the “prehistorical condition that ought to be
transcended, the multiplicity of voices...remains intransigent because it is essential to
the freedom and empowerment envisioned by democratic politics.”22 It is worth
looking more closely at the aural register of this mixed reaction to the sound of
Blake’s poetry. Only if we understand sound and the way that Blake manipulates it in
more detail can we un-riddle the mystery of how Blake’s meaning can be figured as
excessive or as obstinate silence, a witchy howl or a democratic polity clamoring for
consensus. Further, if we are to “regard Jerusalem as a work above all about the
preeminence of perception,” then criticism ought to discern more acutely the sensual
symbolism in which its central characters, Los and Albion, participate and through
which they perceive the poem’s redemptive action.23

21 Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry: A Reading of William Blake (1947; repr.,
22 Steven Goldsmith, Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation
23 Fred Dortort, The Dialectic of Vision: A Contrary Reading of William Blake’s
Jerusalem (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Arts, 1998), 5.
Thomas Frosch put forth a strong preliminary account of Blake’s use of sound, but it was largely overshadowed at the time by contentions about Blake’s pictorialism. This latter line of inquiry has been so influential that the poetry came in some instances to be read as a direct outgrowth of Blake’s visual art. Still more dauntingly fixated on the visible was the giant form of a poststructuralist Blake that emphasized an abstracted “textuality” at the expense of recognizing Blake’s confession that his own experience of his “visions” was oral as well as aural. V.A. De Luca’s is a typical formulation. His account of the unique phenomena that constitute a Blakean sublime sees the written language of the poem consuming not

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24 Thomas Frosch, *The Awakening of Albion*, 103–23.
27 For just two well-known examples of Blake’s claims to this effect, see the letter to William Hayley in which Blake relates, “Thirteen years ago, I lost a brother & with his spirit I converse daily & hourly in the Spirit & See him in my remembrance in the regions of my Imagination. I hear his advice & even now write from his Dictate” (E705); and the letter to Thomas Butts that describes Blake writing “from immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time” (E729).
only the aural dimension of its verbal art but the very world outside of the poem as well:

[Blake’s] text is not conceived as historically and spatially situated in an empirical world, but rather the empirical world finds itself situated in the spaces created by the differences and correspondences of the text. Such a conception tends to emphasize the formal elements of signification over the referential. It privileges the visual look of the text over aural comprehension, and hence writing over speech [.]²⁸

Yet Robert Lowth, the eighteenth-century theorist of prophetic verse, concluded that the Hebrew bible “availed itself of the assistance of harmony” and was composed by prophetic poets “capable of interesting and affecting the senses and passions, of captivating the ear,” which is the only sense organ singled out in Lowth’s lecture on

the effects of ancient poetry.\textsuperscript{29} One decisive way of reading this passage as it pertains to the poststructuralist vision of Blake—a vision preoccupied with the hermeneutic struggle between oral and written language in Blake’s poetry—is that “Lowth brings head to head the two competing rhetorics deeply embedded in Western discourse, leaving little doubt as to which [speech, not writing], in the long run, is more socially powerful” and more evocative of prophetic verse.\textsuperscript{30} Indeed, reading for sound, both the sound-shape of lines and the way that sound becomes thematic within them, may be the best way to approach prophetic poetry. It is always advisable to keep in mind the notion that the “prophetic word has something unwritable about it.”\textsuperscript{31}

Subsequent schools of thought aside, the visual bias in postwar Blake criticism—and its foundation in notions of textuality—dates to its founding document: Frye’s \textit{Fearful Symmetry}, in which “Blake…seems to be striving for an ‘alphabet of forms,’ a Tarot pack of pictorial visions which box the entire compass of the imagination in an orderly sequence.”\textsuperscript{32} Only more recently have Blake’s commentators begun to take seriously Josephine Miles’s contention of a half-century ago that Blake’s “song, [his] bardic line, leads to some thought about the sound of Blake’s language as well as its sense,” and to ask along with her: “What are the major


\textsuperscript{32} Northrop Frye, \textit{Fearful Symmetry}, 417.
uses of sound that accompany [Blake’s] major vocabulary?”

Focusing particularly on the prophetic poetry, Steven Goldsmith concluded recently that for Blake “a ‘lucid vision’ sometimes consists almost entirely of sound” and that “images, even in a composite art form such as Blake’s, do not preclude the possibility of sounds uncoupling themselves to follow their own path.”

Further, the recent surge in work on romantic poetry and the life sciences has generated a view of Blake as a poet who “made it clear that to rely as Enlightenment science did on the characteristics of visible structure is to fail to recognize the essence of living forms in the natural world.”

In other words, Blake may be seen as part of a counter-Enlightenment tradition of thinkers preoccupied with alternative methods for detecting that which could not be seen. Finally, there exists growing recognition that for Blake “imagination may be visionary, but its vision is as verbal as it is visual, and even in the illuminated works, more the former than the latter”; as a result, Blake’s prophetic poetry, “more than almost any other poetic or rhetorical mode, relies, according to its own self-presentation, on the power of voice and sound.”

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In what sense is “Eternity…in love with the productions of time” (E36)? In *Jerusalem*, I think, we see that the creation and perception of sound is the one activity that links the states of Eden and Generation. More to Blake’s point, sound is the sense that more easily allows us to perceive the superimposition of Eden onto Generation, their synchronous existence as eternal states into which we, like Jesus or Los, may enter and exit at will. I proceed on the assumption that the principle of synchrony in Blake’s work is more detectable through sonic excavation than the kinds of narrative analysis that have been attempted in the past with respect to *Jerusalem*.

George Bataille claimed that, when reading Blake’s prophecies, “analysis is merely cancelling out a remarkable work and…substituting a somnolent heaviness for awakeness.”37 All lengthy, fine-grained readings of *Jerusalem*’s textual surface risk prolonging the sleep of Albion—this is the trap Blake has set for us. But it is precisely the Blakean importance placed upon the moment of “waking” that requires an attention to sound. What follows may seem like the kind of analytical drudgery that invites Blake’s mockery, but the confusion demonstrated by the critical tradition on Blake’s use of sound requires such a focus. The golden thread one must follow in Blake’s work, winding it into a ball as one approaches the gates of heaven, is a mode of listening. Listening for the soundscape of *Jerusalem* heightens one’s awareness of the transparency of eternity in Blake’s myth. Sound is all around, permeating the realms of existence as Los wanders through them. In fact, this soundscape is so pervasive that one can easily disregard or over-determine its meaning. Once Blake’s

soundscape is traced, however, one also notices that a state of wakefulness has already been achieved.

Hoffman found that words attending strictly to the visual faculty in Blake’s work as a whole (1435) occur only slightly more often than words referring strictly to the sense of sound (1361), accounting for less than a one percent difference. But this count does not include uses of the word “vision” in Blake’s work, which, I hope to show, refers just as often in its metaphorical sense to visual perception as it does to the perception of sound. This is no trivial distinction with regard to Jerusalem, especially if we accept that “Jerusalem is conceived as vision itself.” From the time of Blake’s earliest visionary experiences to his last, sound seems to have played an integral role in their perception:

It was when he was one day thus secluded in the dim vaulted solitude of Westminster Abbey that he saw, as he afterwards records, one of his visions. The aisles and galleries of the old building (or sanctuary) suddenly filled with a great procession of monks and priests, choristers and censer-bearers, and his entranced ear heard the chant of plain-song

39 Using Nelson Hilton’s online Blake concordance hosted by the University of Georgia, (http://www.english.uga.edu/~nhilton/ee/home.html), I found 303 uses of “vision” and its cognates in Blake’s poetry, putting the potential references to auditory perception at well over the number referring strictly to the visual faculty, if for Blake “vision” sometimes refers to aural experience.
and chorale, while the vaulted roof trembled to the sound of organ music. 41

On the day of his death, August 12th, 1827, he composed and uttered songs to his Maker so sweetly to the ear of his Catherine, that when she stood to hear him, he, looking upon her most affectionately, said, ‘My beloved, they are not mine—no—they are not mine.’ 42

Similarly, contemporary accounts of Blake’s speech and conversation depict a man who could cast a spell over other people with the sound of his words, transmuting the quotidian into the compelling verbal produce of the imagination. At the same time, he could speak in ways that concealed his meaning from others who might be hostile to it if they were able to hear and understand correctly:

Blake would say outrageous things to people—answering a fool according to his folly, to those who did not and never would understand either him or his work. 43

41 Oswald Crawford, “William Blake: Artist, Poet, and Mystic,” New Quarterly Magazine (London, 1874), quoted in Blake Records, 16. Bentley noted that the letter to John Butts from which Crawford claimed to have drawn this account has never been traced.


43 George Richmond, conversation recorded in Anne Gilchrist: Her Life and Writings (London, 1887), quoted in Blake Records, 55.
His voice, in general, was low and musical, his manners gentle and unassuming, his conversation a singular mixture of knowledge and enthusiasm.44

His talk was so Enchanting that Palmer altho’ he hated London when sitting with him in his rooms at Fountain Court and glancing through the windows looking over the river Blake would speak of the view in such a way that it look[ed] delightful to Palmer.45

These anecdotes reveal Blake’s riddling way of speaking and the mellifluous quality of his voice, even when expounding his “enthusiasms” and ideas strange for others to hear. This skill in speaking, as that demonstrated by the parables of Jesus in the gospels, opens a gap between word and idea that alienates listeners unprepared to concentrate deeply on what is being said. In Blake’s terms, this is a method for keeping spiritual enemies at arm’s length, that they might not become corporal ones as well. The importance of this perceptual gap and the way it is realized through sound in Jerusalem will be explained more fully below, where I examine sound as a central thematic and formal component of Blake’s myth, delineating as well the important way in which sound incorporates Blake’s concept of “vision.” Such a reading of Jerusalem will tell us less about the poem’s overall structure or the material conditions

45 J.C. Strange, MS Journal, quoted in Blake Records, 727.
of its production than about the way Blake uses sound to put the lie to both visible structure and materiality as a philosophical paradigm.46

In fact one can use the visible in Blake’s work to give an account of its aural thematics. Take, for instance, two striking illuminations that point away from their own medium and towards the power of sound in Blake’s prophetic poetry. The first, from *The Book of Urizen*, depicts Los in an abject state of pity over Urizen’s fall and consequently, out of sympathy with Urizen, oozing from his own body or mind a globe of blood that will become the vegetable universe. Both figure and globe appear to hang suspended in the spatial void that has resulted from Urizen’s fall. For no apparent reason, Los stops his ears. In the second plate, from the beginning of *Jerusalem*, Los stands at his forge looking up defiantly at his specter. As a symbol, the specter is conceptually related to the globe of blood from the *Urizen* image, as both are divisions from Los that have resulted from the fall (of Urizen in the former case, and of Albion in the latter). But in *Jerusalem*, the specter is now the figure stopping its ears.

Nelson Hilton noted the relationship between the two illustrations, calling the latter a re-presentation of “one of the most mysterious Blakean moments,” the division from the self of the spectral material world in fallen sense perception.47 David Erdman, on the other hand, carefully noted the resistance to sound occurring in both images without mentioning the plates’ relationship with each other.48 The plates’ relationship needs to be understood, however, in order to realize that the image from Jerusalem inverts the image from Urizen in important ways that signal a refinement of Blake’s thinking with respect to the sound of his myth. Few better examples exist of how “Blake’s poetry is out to ironise eyesight.”49

47 Nelson Hilton, Literal Imagination, 166.
In the fifth chapter of *The Book of Urizen*, the human imagination, personified as Los, begins to separate from the world it creates. That separation causes sight to play a noticeably less dynamic role than sound. “All the wisdom & joy of life: / Roll like a sea around him, / Except what his little orbs / Of sight by degrees unfold,” while the fires of Los’s furnace respond reciprocally, for as “Los shrunk from his task: / His great hammer fell from his hand: / His fires beheld, and sickening, / Hid their strong limbs in smoke.” Sight is only described negatively here—its diminishment measures the expansion of the state of Ulro, or death, as that state engulfs Los’s experience of reality. Los’s forge answers his bodily myopia by fizzling out in a stream of smoke that obscures the fiery limbs of the imagination, the real and eternal human body. No longer able to behold Eden *through* the eye because of his development of the physical eye that he now believes he is confined to see *with*, the persona of Los in this plate represents a mutuality of failed vision in which both figure and ground, tenor and vehicle, suffer the “loss” to which Los’s name points. The contrariety of active thought and expression that defines the Edenic state is now homogenized, doubled back upon itself in a dull, blind round that apes the starry wheels of the void as presently perceived by fallen sight.\(^5\) This cancelled beholding and the shrinking orbs of sight are the traces of “Abstract philosophy warring in enmity against Imagination,” which now appears to be retreating into the state of obsolescence and passivity that

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\(^5\) *In The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake asserts: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good & Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason[.] Evil is the active springing from Energy. Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell” (E34).
defines the state of Ulro or Hell (J 5:58, E148). At the same time, and by contrast, sound is expressed both positively and negatively, corresponding to the dual role it assumes as both a measure of the expansion of Ulro and a prophetic forecast of Ulro’s eventual defeat through a renewed expansion of eternal vision upon mankind’s return to the state of Eden. Just as Los’s “bellows & hammer are silent now / A nerveless silence, [and] his prophetic voice / Siez’d; a cold solitude & dark void,” the incipient resistance to this silent state of affairs also begins to make itself known, “For with noises ruinous loud; / With hurtlings & clashings & groans / The Immortal endur’d his chains, / Tho’ bound in a deadly sleep” (E77).

Here we see sound granted in Blake’s myth something like the same salvific quality with which Los himself has long been identified. In this light it becomes possible to understand the metaphor at work here (though it is still a very dense one): the prophetic voice, when “siez’d,” is figured as a spatial void that sucks humanity down into Generation; and the resistant groan that presages one’s awakening (and thus one’s ceasing to hurtle through that void) represents the struggle against that seizure of voice and its relenting. Sound retains a level of conceptual flexibility, even in Ulro, that is unobtainable by sight. Both death and nascent renewal signal their strength through sound, giving rise to the realization that Blake intends for sound, like Los, to travel freely between the states of Hell and Heaven in order to regenerate and transform the former to the latter. That Los should plug his ears at this point in the accompanying illumination confirms this. His sight is obscured by the large globe of blood and hair that seems to hang from his face like a tumor, but Los appears to acknowledge that something calls to him from Eden in his abject fallen state. That
Los’s stopping of his ears occurs at the mid-point of the image similarly confirms the role sound plays as an intermediary between the two states of perception/existence.

When Blake engraved plate 6 of Jerusalem, at least ten years later, the resistance to sound remained the central focus of the illumination. Yet it is the figure separated from Los—his reasoning specter, not Los himself—that displays this resistance. Blake must have fixated upon the salvific connotation of the sense of sound depicted in the Urizen plate and refined it further for Jerusalem. For the sound resisted by the specter in the later plate is not the horrid groaning and thrashing of a bound Promethean god, cast down from Heaven on account of his pity for fallen man. It is, on the contrary, a song anyone would joy to hear if they understood it well enough: it is the song of a confident savior who enters freely into Hell and demonstrates no resistance to his own redemptive aural perception:

For as his Emanation divided, his Spectre also divided

In terror of those starry wheels: and the Spectre stood over Los

Howling in pain: a blackning Shadow, blackning dark & opake

Cursing the terrible Los: bitterly cursing him for his friendship

To Albion, suggesting murderous thoughts against Albion.

Los rag’d and stamp’d the earth in his might & terrible wrath!

He stood & stampd the earth! then he threw down his hammer in rage &

In fury: then he sat down and wept, terrified! Then arose

And chaunted his song, laboring with the tongs and hammer:
But still the Spectre divided, and still his pain increas’d!

(J 6:3-12, E149)

Los appears positively rakish, calmly gazing up at the spectral dragon of his Urizenic self to which the poem depicts him singing. In the Jerusalem plate, Los’s forge is now visible and clearly roaring, so much so that the bellows are set down momentarily in order to allow Los to rest and mock his specter. Further, Los’s prophetic voice is no longer silenced. Instead his song is literally present on the plate, engraved as verse. In other words, that which is obscured or muted in Urizen bursts forth here in radiant energy. Blake makes clear to us that this presence has been established through sound, as Los “chaunted his song, laboring with the tongs and hammer.” The rhythm of Los’s chant is not yet compelling enough to reintegrate the specter of human reason with the eternal body of human imagination, but the point is that the imagination’s efforts in this direction depend upon sound. It is interesting to note that the passage quoted above displays a striking degree of rhythmic variation until we come to the final line, which falls into a predominately iambic pattern:

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| u          | /       | u           | /     | u       | u    | /    | u        | /       | u         | /         | u         | / |
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But still the Spectre divided, and still his pain increas’d!

This is apt, if we accept that it is the “iambic meter that Blake would argue fails to arouse the ‘Auricular nerves’ and in fact serves the rational function Blake associates with the eye and single vision.”

the aural qualities of salvation that Blake wished to convey through this plate’s refinement of ideas about sound?

The initial exchange of Los and his specter is of a piece with the sound that opens the poem. *Jerusalem* begins with the “mild song” of the “Saviour” hovering over the poet, “Spreading his beams of love, & dictating the words” of the poem (*J* 4:4-5, E146). On the following plate Los registers his separation from Jerusalem, Blake’s symbol of imaginative freedom, by hearing her cries of agony echo in the distant void of the Newtonian universe that has just appeared in the wake of Albion’s fall: Jerusalem is “Lamenting for her children, for the sons & daughters of Albion,” and Los “heard her lamentations in the deeps afar! his tears fall / Incessant before the Furnaces, and his Emanation divided in pain, / Eastward toward the Starry Wheels” (*J* 5:65-8, E148). It is a sharp contrast but one with a startling reflexivity built into it. While Jesus sings to the poet from Eden, Albion’s fall subsequently transmutes this mild song into the lamentations of the savior’s divided emanation. Yet the latter is necessarily included in the former as a feature of the poem being dictated. Even though much of the poem will take place within fallen experience, the characters of *Jerusalem* communicate with each other through a series of intricate orations precisely because the redemptive imagination is calling the shots. Los is re-building Eden (in the form of *Jerusalem*) even as it fragments. The “opake blackening Fiend,” Los’s specter, speaks to Los out of necessity, for salvific action consists of sound and not sight, as the specter’s own opacity, his obscuring of his own face, and his resistance to sound in plate six all attest.
This does not, however, stop the specter from attempting, like Satan in

*Paradise Regained*, to set before Los a regime of sight that revels in the chaos and the corrupted power dynamics of the fallen world as the only possible reality:

O! thou seest not what I see! What is done in the Furnaces.

Listen, I will tell thee what is done in moments to thee unknown:

Luvah was cast into the Furnaces of affliction and sealed,

And Vala fed in cruel delight, the Furnaces with fire:

Stern Urizen beheld; urgd by necessity to keep

The evil day afar, and if perchance with iron power

He might avert his own despair: in woe & fear he saw

Vala incircle round the Furnaces where Luvah was clos’d:

With joy she heard his howlings, & forgot he was her Luvah

(J 7:8, 28-36, E149-50)

What the specter offers here is a distorted mirror image of the threat posed to it by

Los’s forge: Vala, the veil of nature, is, in the specter’s reckoning, in charge of the furnace, which molds a prison for loving desire (Luvah) instead of forging an awakened consciousness. Urizen, like the specter, “beholds” this scene and tolerates it because it is a scenario that keeps at bay the apocalypse that will one day arrive and burn up the empirically oriented regime of sight (which Urizen/“your reason” represents) along with the covering veil of physicality that restricts desire. At the same time, Urizen fears what he beholds because he must become the prison of whatever object of desire appears in his sightline, reminded constantly that the independence of his reasoning faculty is really just a variety of passivity caused by his alienation from
Luvah, or fulfilled imaginative desire. Desire howls from Vala’s furnace while its tormenters do their best to ignore it, misreading Luvah’s agony for cries of joy or else pretending to forget Luvah altogether.

In response, Los sings a song that claims, “Altho’ I know not this! I know far worse than this: / I know that Albion hath divided me, and that thou O my Spectre, / Hast just cause to be irritated,” commanding his specter to “look stedfastly upon me” and “Comfort thyself in my strength” (J 7:51-4, E150). This commandment to “look” seems at first to be ironic, as we know now that whatever the specter sees is a lie. But a better way of reading Los’s injunction is as an expression of pity in recognition that all the specter wants to do is look.52 The specter is all ego: though it is willing to speak to Los, it steadfastly refuses in return to hear Los’s song, which offers a correction of the specter’s vision. Consequently, Los pities his obstinate selfhood, allowing that it may as well steady its gaze on the fallen world if it will not listen. Regardless, Los will go about his work transforming fallen existence through creation of the “time… / When all Albions injuries shall cease, and when we shall / Embrace him tenfold bright, rising from his tomb in immortality” (J 7:54-6, E150).

Still, the fallen state has its own soundscape in which “Albions mountains run with blood, [and] the cries of war & of tumult / Resound into the unbounded night” (J 5:6-7, E147). The strongest evidence that Blake envisions a soundscape for each of his realms of existence is that the possibility exists at all of Los being heard in his

attempts to communicate with his specter. Why else should Los persist in communicating in a medium that the specter seems so intent on denying? Therefore Los ends his speech with the hard truth that the specter must abandon his cultivation of darkness and opacity and develop instead a sense of sound, with the ultimate aim of coaxing the specter to join Los in his chanting:

I know thy deceit & thy revenges, and unless thou desist
I will certainly create an eternal Hell for thee. Listen!
Be attentive! Be obedient! Lo the Furnaces are ready to receive thee.
I will break thee into shivers! & melt thee in the furnaces of death;
I will cast thee into forms of abhorrence & torment if thou
Desist not from thine own will, & obey not my stern command!
I am closd up from my children: my Emanation is dividing
And thou my Spectre art divided against me. But mark
I will compel thee to assist me in my terrible labours. To beat
These hypocritic Selfhoods on the Anvils of bitter Death
I am inspired: I act not for myself: for Albions sake
I now am what I am: a horror and an astonishment
Shuddring the heavens to look upon me

(John 8:7-19, E151)

Only two other times does Los enjoin his listeners to “listen,” and he is speaking to members of the Divine Family and the daughters of Beulah, semi-divine entities that should be able to hear Los without much resistance (John 38:55, E185; 83:64, E242). It is this injunction to the specter to “Listen!” that is truly ironic and, more importantly, strategic on Los’s part. Over half of these lines begin with “I,” and the tone of Los’s
“stern command” echoes the “Stern Urizen” that the specter accuses Los of being. Los is speaking the specter’s language, conforming his message to a spectral vision of reality enchained by stern, implacable reason. This is necessary for Los to be understood by his fallen auditor; but by doing so Los also represents his own fall into generation and decay. This forecasts the intensification of Albion’s fall that will occur in chapter three—an intensification that deepens through the sense of sight, as Los becomes what he beholds in his attempt to rescue Albion. Such deepening identification with fallen man in Los is already evident in these lines: “I now am...a horror and an astonishment / Shuddering the heavens to look upon me.” Even as Los chides the specter to prick up his ears and listen, Los begins to feel that his selfhood will consume him before he can compel it to re-integrate with him.

The “hypocritic Selfhoods” that Los invites his specter to beat with him on the anvils are Albion’s and his own, but the specter is Los’s selfhood! It is like asking a condemned prisoner to throw the switch at his own execution. The crucial difference between Los and Albion, then, is that Los retains knowledge of his own fallen state and can recognize and manipulate it. Like both Isaiah and the figure of Jesus depicted in all four gospels, Los can hear and understand what he is hearing, see without being deceived by the eye. As it is repeated in the King James Version, this formulation always links seeing merely with the act of perception while enlightened hearing is always defined as “understanding” or, in John, connected to “the heart” rather than to a sense organ.53 When Los tells his specter to look at him, he knows that his specter

53 “And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not” (Isa. 6:9); “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because
will look with an uncomprehending Urizenic gaze. As a result, when Los calls on his selfhood to listen, he knows that the specter can hardly be expected to do so properly or at all. As long as the specter is looking with the eye and not hearing with the understanding, it cannot fathom that Los’s invitation to join him at the forge is an invitation to destroy itself in the fires of regeneration. Los’s sense of irony in this respect is an acknowledgment that his song and the specter’s babble are both contained within the redemptive song of the poem, and both must be heard in turn in order for the specter’s eventual reintegration to occur.

The beating of hammer and anvil are also key to reintegration here and throughout Jerusalem; so much so, in fact, that hammer and anvil become a metaphor for the poem. In Jerusalem the sound of poetry provides the stimulation for what Blake refers to, in The Four Zoas, as the “Auricular Nerves of Human life” (E301). Frosch identified these nerves as the “ground of verbal communication” in Blake’s poetry because they “are socializing, rather than individuating as the perspectival eye is, and are thus appropriately pivotal to a myth of reintegration.”54 To understand how the hearing of poetry becomes in Jerusalem the highest mark of this sociality, recall that Blake condemns the iambic meter of blank verse, just as Milton a century and a

54Thomas Frosch, The Awakening of Albion, 106.
half earlier had condemned rhyme. In the address “To the Public” that opens chapter one of *Jerusalem*, Blake explains his approach to the rhythm and sound of his prophecy:

When this verse was first dictated to me I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place: the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts – the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts: all are necessary to each other.

Poetry fetter’d, Fetters the Human Race!

(J 3, E145-6)

The passage is striking first of all because it tells us that for Blake, “dictation” is not used in the absolutely direct sense that we might assume. Blake chooses the rhythm, the line-length, and even the words with which to set down the poem that he claims to have received. A gap opens for Blake between hearing and composing so that sound can be

55 Cf. John Hollander, “Blake and the Metrical Contract,” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick A. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 293–310, for the view that Blake’s use of the long line was actually an attempt to recover Miltonic cadence after it had been misunderstood and deformed by Milton’s eighteenth century imitators.
translated from one state of existence to another. “To the Public” is itself a prose preface, but it is careful to place Blake’s claim for the free verse of Jerusalem in a poetic context that includes Milton and Shakespeare. Blake must state explicitly in prose that which is implied in his poem, chiefly that the sound of prophetic utterance is poetic while obeying no known poetic convention. The poet hears the transmission from Eden and actively shapes it for the ear of fallen man. This address “To the Reader” is, in effect, the prosaic re-statement of Los’s acknowledgment that his specter will hear without understanding until Los can entice his selfhood back to the forge and beat it back into the divine body. This acknowledgment is related to the second curious aspect of “To the Reader”: it actively invites readers to notice such poetic intervention and shaping of sound by tracing its “minute articulations” (J 15:13, E159). One’s attention is drawn by this invitation to words that Blake first engraved in plate 3 of Jerusalem then later scratched out: “love,” “blessed,” “Dear,” “forgive,” and “friendship.” These “gaps suggest that Blake cannot capture every imaginatively heard word; readers must use their inward ears to perceive them,” and that every “human voice colors its phrases differently; they are shaped to suit ‘the mouth of a true orator.’”

The kind of minute tracing of Blake’s poem suggested by “To the Reader” would seem to be impossible for even the most dedicated readers. Yet it is possible to demonstrate here at least that the song of Los and the speech of his specter bear out some of Blake’s fine sonic distinctions. Scanning the specter’s attempt to draw Los down into a Hell of his own devising reveals a terrifyingly adept use of rhythm in the service of deception:

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/ \ / u / \ u / \ u / \ u \
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O! thou seest not what I see! What is done in the Furnaces.

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/ u / u / \ / u / u / u u / u /
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Listen, I will tell thee what is done in moments to thee unknown:

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/ u u / u / u / u \ u u / u u /
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Luvah was cast into the Furnaces of affliction and sealed,

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u / u / u / u u / u u / u u /
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And Vala fed in cruel delight, the Furnaces with fire

On a first reading, the scansion of these lines seems to bear out the suspicion shared by some of Blake’s contemporaries that he was insane. Why would a poet ever use a straightforward word like “furnaces” three times within four lines but stress its final

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57 Several book-length studies of Jerusalem have been written, but even with the finer attention afforded by these sustained commitments to the poem, none attempted the kind of close-grained, line-by-line analysis that Blake appears to point his readers toward. In addition to Sklar’s recent effort in Blake’s Jerusalem as Visionary Theater, Dortort’s The Dialectic of Vision, and Paley’s The Continuing City, see Minna Doskow, William Blake’s Jerusalem: Structure and Meaning in Poetry and Picture (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982) and Joseph H. Wicksteed, William Blake’s Jerusalem (London: The William Blake Trust, 1953).
syllable differently in each instance? And how could recognizable metrical patterning
be so totally dispensed with in a poem we expect to have not only every word but “every
letter…studied and put into its fit place”? The lack of symmetry in stress pitch and
distribution threatens to instill the very awkwardness that Blake claims he wants to
avoid by abandoning blank verse. Look at the way sound maps onto sense more closely,
however, and the effect of verisimilitude is astonishing.

The specter’s lie is effectively built into the metrical structure of the verse: “O,”
“see,” “not,” and “see” receive primary stresses in the first half of the first line,
highlighting the specter’s offer of sight as a self-cancelling vision, the gift of seeing
without seeing. The placement of secondary stress in the first line on “you,” “in,” and
both uses of the relative pronoun is purely (but cleverly) contextual. As monosyllables
and inconspicuous parts of speech (pronouns and prepositions), they would normally
receive no stress in the positions they occupy, but Blake has preceded each one with
extra heavy stresses, all of which borrow their strength from the line’s initial “O!” This
has the effect of sending the line forward with added emphasis, such that a typical
anapest needs something like a slight stepladder of stress to lead down to its first
unstressed syllable from the preceding foot’s beat. By the time one arrives at “Furnaces”
at the end of the line, this extra emphasis is not very evident in the beat any longer, but
the final beat that would create the anapestic trimeter that defines the second half of the
line is withheld. This all has the effect of inducing readers’ vertigo, as we are rushed
headlong at once into the specter’s false vision of reality at the same time that we are
given the sense of being accommodated by and accustomed to it. The second line is
perfectly ugly in the way it uses a trochaic hexameter, shifting sharply into two iambic
feet at the end, in order to emphasize strongly the factitious character of the specter’s narrative. It is the poetic equivalent of wearing plaids with stripes or, more to Blake’s point perhaps, an imitation of the “scrannel pipes” blown by the crooked shepherds in “Lycidas.” This line also signals clearly with its hypotactic construction, linking what comes after to what came before, that the two lines of subsequent iambs ought to be read as falsely melodious. Blake was also “sensitive to dialect” and often “made dialect jokes himself,” with the joke in the differing stresses across the three uses of the word “Furnaces” being that the specter himself is imitating different voices, unsure of what he is saying or what his real voice ought to sound like.58 Repeating the word with variation in this way allows Blake to depict the specter as an actor trying out his lines with different intonations. This amounts to an ingenious combination of the gentle with the terrific (or terrifying) in attempt to reveal the spectral selfhood’s fundamental self-deception.

By contrast, Los’s injunction to “Listen!” is imbued with the hallmarks of what Blake surely considered one of his purely “terrific” passages:

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Be attentive! Be obedient! Lo the Furnaces are ready to receive thee.

I will break thee into shivers! & melt thee in the furnaces of death;

I will cast thee into forms of abhorrence & torment if thou

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Desist not from thine own will, & obey not my stern command!

Again, the pattern is chaotic, but this is partly because Los mimics his specter’s speech, at once enticing the specter back to the forge and mocking it; and partly because Los’s song assumes a stentorian tone as he attempts to cut through the specter’s wall of deceptive words with a wall of sound whose strong emphases indicate that it means what it says. The final syllables of “attentive” and “obedient” in the first line would normally be unstressed, but Blake’s exclamatory punctuation gives them secondary stress, which demonstrates that Los can manipulate (and manipulate with) speech as well as his specter can. But Los’s line takes the specter’s trochaic over-insistence on formality and haphazardly jumbles it rather than simply reversing it into sweet iambics.

The first line here is split evenly between stressed syllables (10) and unstressed (8)/secondarily stressed (2) syllables, giving it the sense of a regular iambic or trochaic line that has been severely adulterated. After a shambolic yet distinctly trochaic beat, the first half of this line runs its course, giving the intimation that something anapestic will round out Los’s ambiguous invitation/threat. This expected rhythm, however, fails to arrive. Instead, the line lopes to its finish in confusion before resolving in two strong beats. But the following lines give the impression of a prophet having found in those two emphatic beats a method for settling into his own distinctive voice. There are no secondary stresses pointing to ambiguities in tone or meaning in the subsequent lines—just clusters of stress that transform the poetry into something that, in Blake’s day at least, would have been recognized as such only with difficulty. The line of
Los’s speech develops into something composed not of feet so much as pure breath or even cognition in its concentration upon the essential components of the verse. One can nearly form the intended thought using only words that receive Blake’s heavy beat, with the few syllables that fail to signify on their own nonetheless evoking through their sound the words they help to form: “I break thee in shiv, melt thee in death, I cast thee in forms horr, thou sist not thine own will, bey not stern mand!”

The way that sound freely ranges over the inferior, the gentle, and the terrific (in both senses of that word), even within the same speech, creates in Jerusalem the expectation that sound is the sense perception most capable of transcending imposed limitations. Furthermore, through sound we are more readily able to perceive the synchronous layering of Eden onto Ulro and Generation, producing the hopeful possibility that redemption requires only a more finely tuned perception. Sound is the dynamic medium of salvation in the poem and, Blake may be suggesting, in poetry more generally. Los’s debates with his specter take place over Albion’s “Giant beauty and perfection fallen into dust,” within whose supine frame we are invited to hear a similar sonic dynamic. Inside that grounded body, the fallen and redemptive sounds that vie with each other at Los’s forge in an effort to revive Albion are echoically reproduced: “from within his witherd breast grown narrow with his woes: / The corn is turn’d to thistles & the apples into poison: / The birds of song to murderous crows, his joys to bitter groans! / The voices of children in his tents, to cries of helpless infants!” (J 19:8-12, E164). When they are not shrieking like vultures, Albion’s “birds are silent on his hills, flocks die beneath his branches.” Blake makes it clear, however, that the sounds of the fallen landscape and of the forms of life one perceives within it are
merely debased versions of the sounds of Eden. Songbirds crow and drop like flies because Albion’s “tents are fall’n! his trumpets, and the sweet sound of his harp / Are silent on his clouded hills, that belch forth storms & fire” (J 19:2-4, E163-4). The link made more or less explicit in these lines hints that the seed of Albion’s regeneration is contained within his fall by means of the soundscape that engulfs his body—it is a seed, like the savior’s song unfolding as the poem Jerusalem, that actively grows the imagination of eternity in the midst of the fallen world of time and space. This redemptive seed is not contained in the appearance of things, for in the states of Ulro and Generation appearances are always deceptive, at best, or dangerous, at worst. Everything progresses naturally towards an appearance of disintegration and chaos in nature. Cornstalks in the wild are overgrown with thistles, apples rot and ferment to poison, and children mature into the helplessness of advanced age. But even the cries of those aged infants recall their nymph-like chatter in Beulah, the lower Eden that for Blake immediately precedes or succeeds existence in nature. And Albion’s bitter groans recall his Edenic trumpet, just as the belching and groaning of the Earth is grammatically appositive to the sound of Albion’s (now fallen) harp. The sound of Eden is both present and concealed in these lines. By hiding the links in plain sight this way, Blake is, like Jesus in the New Testament, calling to those who would actively understand his meaning with their own imaginations.

Reading for sound in these lines leads to the realization that Blake’s symbol for the sound of our state of existence in time is the clanging of hammer on anvil that takes place at Los’s forge throughout the poem. Symbolically, this forge is diffused throughout the fallen world, standing in for an activity that takes place foremost in
every reader’s mind. The forge produces both the harshness of nature’s “scrannel” piping and the creative activity that attempts to transform it. As the specter gradually unplugs its ears and accepts Los’s invitation to join him at the forge, it stubbornly strikes the notes of the selfhood and of nature, while Los’s hammering, reflecting his transit from Eden to Generation, matches the sounds of the fallen world with echoes of eternity. This ability to keep the “Divine Vision in time of trouble” is ultimately what awakens Albion (J 95:20, E255). The description of supine Albion on plate 19 is explicitly one of a state defined by its obscurity and fallen perception; despite this, however, the sounds of Eden and of Ulro collide in an effort of mental contention to reawaken humanity.

As the eternals who reside in Eden debate their strategy for Albion’s revival, they link the perception of reality to sound, both through their own speech and through its aural manifestations in the fallen states of Ulro and Generation: “He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars / General Good is the plea of the scoundrel hypocrite & flatterer: / For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particles / And not in generalizing Demonstrations of the Rational Power” (J 55: 60-3, E205). But this debate is described in terms of a terrifying soundscape in the state of Generation, indicating how those redemptive particulars are organized:

The Universal Conc[l]ave raged, such thunderous sounds as never
Were sounded from a mortal cloud, nor on Mount Sinai old
Nor in Havilah where the Cherub rolld his redounding flame.

Loud! loud! the Mountains lifted up their voices, loud the Forests
Rivers thunderd against their banks, loud Winds furious fought
Cities & Nations contended in fires & clouds & tempests.
The Seas raisd up their voices & lifted their hands on high

(J 55:20-6, E204)

Eternal mental fight manifests itself in the world of time and space as chaotic sound, the very noise disdained by Locke. At the same time, as in Revelations, thunder and the crashing waves and the rending earth are all aural signs that the fall of mankind is beginning to reverse itself. These sounds are objectified in aspects of the physical world as a prelude to the last judgment because they provide significant counterpoint to the fractious ideation of fallen man. As St. John and countless Roman augurs touched upon before Blake, the natural world’s ability to break through its baseline ambient silence with startling and momentous action provides Blake with an apt parallel for the thought processes of the eternal man. In their disconnection from the fallen intellect, the true cause and appearance of such events is also necessarily disconnected from the eye, as we read in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man” (E36). The contentions of divine humanity do affect fallen humanity, as “Cities & Nations contend” in a bellicose manifestation of the debates taking place in Eden, but these contentions are subsumed in “fires & clouds & tempests” by the larger effect those edenic debates have on the veil of nature as it begins to sunder. The irony is that the inhabitants of those cities of men confuse what is happening with what they perceive to be the results of their own obscure wills and justifications. Unable to hear or
participate in the conversations taking place in eternity, they rush together like Arnold’s proverbial armies in darkness, mistakenly connecting, like Locke, outward appearance with their own ideas about reality, rather than with the clanging of Los’s forge, which is the actual cause of their consolidation of error before apocalypse.

If desire imprisoned in nature’s furnace leads to confused clashes in the night, desire liberated in the furnaces of the imagination is necessary for human beings to hear the divine vision and awaken. In chapter 2, as Los’s salvific efforts begin to penetrate Albion’s sleep, the “Divine Vision like a silent Sun appeard above Albions dark rocks” and “in the Sun, a Human Form appeard / And thus the Voice Divine went forth upon the rocks of Albion” (J 43:1, 4-5, E191). This scene recalls Blake’s catalogue notes for his painting *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, in which he asks his reader, “When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea,” before answering his own question, “O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy” (E565-6). The sun of mere appearance is silent, but this is a prelude to song as the Divine Vision becomes the Voice Divine. The depth of Albion’s stupor is depicted by his inability to hear what the Divine Vision is singing. Like hostages, two “Immortal forms / Saying We alone are escaped,” later revealed to be Los’s specter and emanation (J 44:1-2, E193), come rushing out of Albion’s rocks to join the “Human Family” enclosed by the “mild Sun” (J 43:28-9, E191). For Albion, though, the savior remains a specter of the overheated brain:

Albion walkd on the steps of fire before his Halls

And Vala walkd with him in dreams of soft deluding slumber.
He looked up & saw the Prince of Light with splendor faded

Then Albion ascended mourning into the porches of his Palace

Above him rose a Shadow from his wearied intellect:

Of living gold, pure, perfect, holy: in white linen pure he hoverd

A sweet entrancing self-delusion a watry vision of Albion

Soft exulting in existence; all the Man absorbing!

Albion fell upon his face prostrate before the watry Shadow

Saying O Lord whence is this change! thou knowest I am nothing!

And Vala trembled & coverd her face! & her locks were spread on the pavement

The passage demonstrates Blake’s command over metaphor in articulating his ideas about sound. It is a metaphor whose vehicle seems to forget its tenor so completely that it stretches into allegory without ever fully achieving allegory. This is possibly what Blake meant by referring to his verse as “Sublime Allegory…addressd to the Intellectual powers while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding” (E730). As we switch to Albion’s perspective from the savior’s, it is clear that his deafness to Los’s song is experienced as blindness in the fallen state of existence.

Albion walks his halls with Vala, the veil of nature, who props up the obscurity of Albion’s vision and covers her face at the same time that Albion prostrates, both misperceiving the dimly heard Voice Divine as a Urizenic god demanding submission. This misperception arises from the fallen imagination’s inability to perceive the savior’s song aurally and its related insistence on imagining a visible deity: a
hovering, “watery vision” draped sacramentally in white linen. It is a child’s phantom, or a kind of etiolated Satan, hinted at by the phrase “Prince of Light with splendor faded.” Yet Blake makes clear that it is the voice of the Divine Vision that makes this inkling of eternal truth, imperfect as it is, possible at all for Albion, and as the perspective switches back to that of the savior and the Divine Family, the register switches back also to the aural: “We heard astonishd at the Vision & our heart trembled within us: / We heard the voice of slumberous Albion, and thus he spake: / Idolatrous to his own Shadow” (J 43:44-6, E192). In Eden, the divine humanity hears its visions rather than seeing them, which allows Blake’s eternals to avoid the idolatry of shadows that is definitive of temporal existence.

Returning now to the poem’s climactic awakening, it is easier to understand why Albion is roused in the way that he is. After she awakens first, Brittannia gives a speech of six lines and, Blake tells us, “Her voice pierc’d Albions clay cold ear” (J 95:1, E254). It is a burst of vision, received as sound. Only then does vision make the transition from this aural, metaphorical sense into a more literal one of seeing, as Albion “opend his eyelids in pain; in pain he mov’d / His stony members, he saw England” (J 95:4-5, E255). Aural vision precedes awakened visibility. Moreover, Albion is awakened by sound for the purpose of producing more of it. Sound becomes reciprocal as the newly risen human figure joins the eternal chorus, taking up the Voice Divine himself in an effort to rouse others. “Loud thundering, with broad flashes of flaming lightning and pillars / Of fire,” Albion strides toward the edge of space and time, “speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms, in direful / Revolutions of Action & Passion” (J 95:8-10, E255). In the state of Generation, we
see the sun rise, but Blake’s vision of eternity makes us understand that the effort and sound of Albion’s risen speech is what causes our perception of that event:

Thou seest the Sun in heavy clouds
Struggling to rise above the Mountains. in his burning hand
He takes his Bow, then chooses out his arrows of flaming gold
Murmuring the Bowstring breathes with ardor! clouds roll around the Horns of the wide Bow, loud sounding winds sport on the mountain brows
Compelling Urizen to his Furrow; & Tharmas to his Sheepfold;
And Luvah to his Loom: Urthona he beheld mighty laboring at His Anvil, in the Great Spectre Los unwearied laboring & weeping
Therefore the Sons of Eden praise Urthonas Spectre in songs Because he kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble.

(J 95:11-20, E255)

Even Albion’s bowstring is alive in this state of subsuming vitality, murmuring its assent as the “loud sounding winds” (perhaps the streaming wake of Albion’s dawn-inducing arrow?) compel the eternals to their work. One might be startled that Blake’s vision of eternity includes labor, but this mountain vista is not Beulah, Blake’s pre-Edenic state of pleasurably languorous sleep, out of which Albion finally awakes and which represents the conventional paradise of the Abrahamic faiths. Instead, from Albion’s Pisgah-point perspective as he approaches the true Eden, we view the eternals at their agricultural and domestic tasks, which symbolize their striving, for all time, in the creative activities that are the quintessence of the human person. These are
the Edenic “Wars of mutual benevolence Wars of Love” to which Blake refers (J 97:12, E256), and song is an integral part of that strife. That the eternals should sing songs in praise of the spectral, fallen world is an oddly touching detail. It is meant to reinforce the redemptive power of sound in Blake’s myth. They are notes struck in gratitude and relief that they may now imaginatively behold Urthona in his spectral, time-bound form if they choose to do so without also risking becoming what they behold. Albion has returned from the void, and the portal into it that is illustrated in the poem’s first plate is, for now, sealed up.

Finally, the eternals choose song to praise Los’s efforts as a recognition that his keeping of the Divine Vision manifested in the song that finally convinced Albion to hurl himself into Los’s rejuvenating forge. Arisen, Albion begins to imitate this redemptive song himself, reminding us of the equivalence between sound and imaginative vision in Blake’s myth:

Awake! Awake Jerusalem! O lovely Emanation of Albion
Awake and overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time
For lo! the Night of Death is past and the Eternal Day
Appears upon our Hills: Awake Jerusalem, and come away
So spake the Vision of Albion & in him so spake in my hearing
The Universal Father.

(J 97:1-6, E256)

It is not Albion or Los who speaks here. Rather, it is the “Vision of Albion” that calls out for Jerusalem in these words. Curiously, Jerusalem is bidden to “overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time,” much as Blake considered that the Tower of Babel once
had done. The reintegration of Jerusalem, the principle of imaginative freedom, with
the divine human is, in a certain sense, Blake’s re-building of that tower and his
attempted recovery of a language of potent imaginative power and liberty. In Eden the
human imagination is liberated from its husk; importantly, however, the nervous fibers
of sensation remain. Only now these are spread out in a network that mingles the
senses of all members of the divine body in an approximation of what Ezekiel’s
merkah vision would actually look and feel like:

And every Man stood Fourfold. each Four Faces had. One to the West
One toward the East One to the South One to the North. the Horses
Fourfold
And the dim Chaos brightend beneath, above, around! Eyed as the
Peacock
According to the Human Nerves of Sensation, the Four Rivers of the
Water of Life

South stood the Nerves of the Eye. East in Rivers of bliss the Nerves
of the
Expansive Nostrils West, flowd the Parent Sense the Tongue. North
stood
The labyrinthine Ear. Circumscribing & Circumcising the
excrementitious
Husk & Covering into Vacuum evaporating revealing the lineaments of
Man
(J 98:12-19, E257)
As I read these lines, the tongue is revealed to be the “Parent of Sense” insofar as it creates the possibility of human converse through sound; and the organ of sonic perception appears in the subsequent line. Sound, then, is the ultimate sense. Through sound even those trapped in a fallen state of existence may share intimations of one another’s thoughts and experiences, though this is but a shadow of the conversations that take place in Eden. There, in a final swipe at Locke, Blake tells us that the Divine Family “conversed in Visionary forms dramatic which bright / Redounded from their Tongues in thunderous majesty, in Visions / In new Expanses, creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect” (J 98:29-30, E257-8). Without the ability to perceive this dramatic thundering of sound in Eden, Blake’s apocalypse would result only in so much tongue wagging. The eternal and infinite expansion of creative thought in Blake’s metaphysics requires an expansive quality of sound.
“Kind of empty in the way it sees everything”: John Clare in Stereo

There is so much to be seen everywhere that it’s like not getting used to it, only there is so much it never feels new, never any different. You are standing looking at that building and you cannot take it all in, certain details are already hazy and the mind boggles. What will it all be like in five years’ time when you try to remember? Will there have been boards between the grass part and the edge of the street?

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It is possible that finally, like coming to the end of a long, barely perceptible rise, there is mutual cohesion and interaction. The whole scene is fixed in your mind, the music all present, as though you could see each note as well as hear it.

- John Ashbery, “For John Clare”

John Ashbery’s prose meditation seems to give an account of the thought patterns he found in Clare’s poetry. An Ashberyan version of a Clare poem, “For John Clare” contains a subtle slide from the physical to the metaphysical, which is mirrored by a sense language that also slides from the visual to the aural. All the visual sense data one collects over the course of a lifetime may ultimately be “barely perceptible” to the memory, but cohesion, permanence, and interaction result from one’s reconstructing a

given scene in the mind as music. Ashbery elsewhere praises Clare for his ability to “capture the rhythms of nature, its vagaries and messiness, in a way that even Keats never did,” providing some context for his earlier realization that Clare carries in his head the overwhelming manifold of nature observed as a kind of tune.\(^2\) Clare is able to “capture” nature somehow, freeze it for all time, despite its flux. This suggests that what Ashbery delineates is not a philosophy of nature, as one would expect to find in Clare, but a philosophy of art. Angus Fletcher held that Clare’s “poetry is for Ashbery a model of ‘seeing things.’”\(^3\) But in Ashbery’s eulogy for this quintessential nature poet, it is aural experience that coincides with a sense of finality. Sound allows the poet to finally sense the objects of nature in their essential forms. A creative transposition of the visible to the audible somehow reveals the *dinge an sich* of all phenomenal reality.

May aim in this essay is twofold. More generally, I want to show how Clare makes aesthetic statements in his poetry about how best to bridge the gulf between nature and art. Specifically, I wish to demonstrate that he achieves this aim by privileging representations of sound over the representation of other senses. Through the reconstruction of observed scenes in a manner that wears its artifice up front as a quality of sound, Clare stakes a claim about the primacy of sound in poetic art, and particularly in nature poetry. For Clare, natural detail is best retained in the mind if it


takes on a sound-shape according to the distinct contours of an observer’s sensibility. In this way the visual sensorium converts to an audible one, and the ancient figuration of poetry as music or sound takes on a more literal, functional purpose in Clare’s work. Through sound the poet experiences the landscape in a more essential way than mere provision of its visual re-description would allow. An active, creative presence in the landscape must do something other than reinscribe whatever meets its eye. Presented as poetry, such a reinscription would amount to not much more than lineated note taking, mellifluous though the meter might be. With the strange sound of dialect words answering the sounds of the weather and fauna in his poetry, Clare is able to demonstrate a vital interaction of the human with the animal worlds that would otherwise be absent in a strictly visual descriptive mode. It is through Clare’s use of sound that we can best detect those moments when he “isn’t just describing his local world, but forming it.”

Ashbery’s idea about the sonic basis of Clare’s aesthetic is crucial, though it has not always been at the forefront of Clare studies. First, one must contend with the broadly accepted idea that Clare’s “poetry often asserts the priority of nature over art.” In critics’ haste to honor Clare’s rustic background, they have overemphasized

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his social position in a way that obscures his sense of himself as a creative artist.\(^6\) Criticism has made the mistake too often of assuming that Clare’s “voice is the oaten reed itself, not the sound of the Pastoral Pipe overheard by a poet who has learned to orchestrate it and play antiphonal effects with it.”\(^7\) The importance of sound in Clare’s aesthetic is readily ascertained, though because of their often hidden sources, Clare’s sounds are also easily overlooked.\(^8\) Sound for Clare represents the poetic faculty of the human mind. Although he sometimes reads this faculty into nature, the very act of doing so as well as composing poetry about it induces a wariness of his own presence in the landscape that Clare finds uncomfortable,\(^9\) precisely because the landscape’s

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9 Reaching different conclusions related to Clare’s sense of displacement from the land and his desire for an audience that understood his work, Paul Chirico nevertheless acknowledges “Clare’s wariness about the unsettling effect of his compulsive fascination with poetry” (Paul Chirico, *John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader*, 138–166, quoted at 142). For Clare’s sense of himself as an intruder in the landscape,
appeal consists for Clare in its lack of cultivation and human activity.\textsuperscript{10} Recent attempts to reconcile Clare with aspects of a nineteenth-century social fabric from which he may not have been alienated fail to account both for the essential lack of human presence on the land that he celebrates and for the many moments in his poetry that represent Clare contemplating the effects of his own solitary, poeticizing presence.\textsuperscript{11} It is a paradox that was not lost on Clare and one that he worked into his poetry. Often sound rises near the end of a Clare poem after the scene has been detailed visually, and usually after some incident is related or some presence detected that reminds Clare that he is poetically reconstructing—or cultivating—the landscape he attempts to describe.\textsuperscript{12} The essential question for both Clare and his reader is, “Does Clare live in the place or the poem?”\textsuperscript{13}

Birns has been particularly eloquent on Clare’s tendency to fixate upon aspects of the scene before him that he wishes to keep hidden or veiled from sight: “In his act of hiding [Clare] can know the object while never fully knowing it, sense it yet enshroud it behind a protective veil that curtains it from the catastrophe of utter

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\textsuperscript{10} On Clare’s love of the plenitude he sensed in the wild, pre-enclosure countryside, see, for instance, Ross Wilson, “Clare’s Indistinct Array,” \textit{Romanticism} 17 (2011): 148–59.
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\textsuperscript{12} On the relationship between sound and Clare’s use of natural description, see Sam Ward, “‘To List the Song and Not to Start the Thrust’: John Clare’s Acoustic Ecologies,” \textit{John Clare Society Journal} 29 (2010): 15–32.
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\textsuperscript{13} Jonathan Bate, \textit{The Song of the Earth} (London: Picador, 2000), 156.
revelation.”¹⁴ In other words, the terminal quality of achieved lyric utterance, the “revelation” or apocalyptic “catastrophe” that one expects from the romantic poem’s ultimate turn inwards, does not depend upon the visually descriptive mode that has been so closely associated with Clare and argued over with respect to its merits during the past 75 years of Clare’s slow but sure revival.¹⁵ As Weiner recently put it:

listening leads to knowledge and insight, gently opposing the epistemological priority often granted to vision and certainty, and

[Clare] uses the convergence of described and linguistic sound as a

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¹⁵ Although he is not an admirer of Clare’s predominant descriptive mode, Harold Bloom does provide the seminal account of Clare that links him to the prophetic or “apocalyptic” tradition of Wordsworth and Blake. See Bloom, The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 444–56. For the most successful defense of Clare’s descriptive mode, see John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730–1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972). They are rare now, but reservations about the repetitiveness and seeming monomania of Clare’s descriptive style are legion and can be found as recently as Ashbery’s Other Traditions, 10, and as far back as Keats’s comments on Clare’s poetry, quoted in a letter from Clare’s publisher and republished in The Letters of John Clare, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 38 n. 4. For a nice summary of the backhanded way in which Clare’s nature poetry was devalued by most twentieth-century critics who, like Bloom, favored his later asylum verse, see Judith Wainwright, “The Particular Place,” Stand 14 (1973), 42: “Critics on the whole take the view that until the later asylum poems his strength is in his descriptive powers and his eye for detail, but that may be as one would expect from a poet so lacking in formal education—his poems lack form and except for the description, content.”
model for a literary mimesis that is verbal and formal as well as representational.16

Yet this formulation raises as many questions as Weiner answers with her astute readings of Clare’s lyric corpus: What kind of listening leads to knowledge while opposing certainty? How is it possible for “insight,” a governing metaphor of visual experience, to be gleaned sonically? And, above all, how does Clare transmute the presumably visual experience of a landscape poet into the “music” that fixes “the whole scene…in your mind”—the notes that, in Ashbery’s account of Clare’s poetry, one can hear as well as see? What is ultimately at stake in my argument is the question of how these two senses interact and diverge in Clare’s poetics; and also how Clare worked them into verse while remaining conscious of their widely different abilities to convey meaning.

In order to address such concerns, criticism must look beyond that other frequent interpretation of Clare as a poet of “sometimes-obsessive attention to the immediate, visible world” whose “voluminous poetry, early and late, mad and sane, exults in what he saw firsthand outdoors.”17 A good starting point for an examination

17 Stephen Burt, “John Clare’s Heirs,” *Boston Review* 40 (September/October 2015): 76, 74. The “faculty of sheer vision” in Clare’s work championed by John Middleton Murry in *John Clare and Other Studies* (London: Peter Nevill, 1950), 20, has often become in more recent criticism Clare’s faculty of sight, as the focus has shifted away from the asylum poetry to a revaluation of Clare’s earlier pastoral mode. See Erica McAlpine, “Keeping Nature at Bay: John Clare’s Poetry of Wonder,” *Studies in Romanticism* 50 (2011): 79–104. On Clare’s efforts to “grant the vulnerable places, animals, and persons in his poems a heightened visibility,” see Sarah M. Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press,
of the sonic dimension of Clare’s work is The Midsummer Cushion, the collection that remained unpublished until a century after Clare’s death.\footnote{18 Some of its poems were nevertheless edited and repackaged by Clare’s publisher before being issued as The Rural Muse (1835).} Clare’s earlier volumes were either so heavily influenced by the eighteenth-century pastoral tradition and the market for so-called “peasant verse,” or so heavily compromised by his editors, that I have chosen not to treat them here. The Shepherd’s Calendar (1827), the third of four volumes published during Clare’s lifetime, is generally considered his best work before The Midsummer Cushion. Nevertheless, even it has been viewed as “so insistently editorialized that it can scarcely be called Clare’s own.”\footnote{19 John Lucas, England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry, 1688–1900 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), 147.} Sometime during the late 1820s, however, “Clare’s attitude towards his audience changed, and by the

\footnote{1999), 147–183, quoted at 150. For a strong reading of Clare as a “seeing poet,” consult Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Rural Scenes and Natural Representation, 141–61, esp. 153; on Clare as a poet of pictorial observation concerned with ground and horizon, see Angus Fletcher, A New Theory for American Poetry, 57–74; for a lengthier treatment see also Timothy Brownlow, John Clare and Picturesque Landscape, passim. William J. Howard, John Clare, 25–56, interprets Clare’s “Poetic Eye”; while Ronald Blythe focuses on his “Indigenous Eye” in Talking about John Clare (Nottingham, UK: Trent Books, 1999), 11–25. A very influential account of Clare’s “strongly felt responses to the visible aspects of recent rural change” is found in Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 133–41, quoted at 136. For the most recent iteration of the visual emphasis in Clare studies, see Fiona Stafford, “John Clare’s Colours,” in New Essays on John Clare, ed. Simon Kovesi and Scott McEathron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17–37.}
1830s he was writing poems in which his defiance of genteel prejudice was no longer tempered—or undercut—by deference.”20

Although about two-thirds of the poems intended for *The Midsummer Cushion* were emended by Clare’s patrons and published in 1835 as *The Rural Muse*, the original impetus behind their composition was to produce a volume that would finally allow Clare to break free of both the literary marketplace and the society admirers who liked to “fix” his poems in manuscript.21 To this end, the dedication Clare drafted for the volume is really an anti-dedication:

I shall so far deviate from the commonplace license of prefaces as to make none & merely occupy the space that a preface universally occupies to explain the title to these trifles. It is a very old custom among villagers in summer time to stick a piece of greensward full of field flowers & place it as an ornament in their cottages which ornaments are called Midsummer Cushions. And as these trifles are field flowers of humble pretentions & of various hues I thought the above cottage custom gave me an opportunity to select a title that was not inapplicable to the contents of the volume—not that I wish the reader to imagine that by so doing I consider these poems in the light of flowers that can even ornament a cottage by their presence—yet if the

eye of beauty can feel even an hours entertainment in their perusal I shall take it as the proudest of praise & if the lover of simple images & rural scenery finds anything to commend my end & aim is gratified.  

Here Clare appears to distinguish between two different types of reader, and he does so in visual terms. The strange reference to the “eye of beauty” evokes both a languid aesthete poring over a line of verse and a pruning editor seeking to match the sense of it to preconceived abstraction; on the other hand, lovers of “simple images & rural scenery,” in the phrase’s insipid generality, suggests the audience for the editorial product. Further, Clare states (rather underwhelmingly) that his “end & aim is gratified” by their approval—not necessarily achieved. In this light, “proudest of praise” seems less likely an expression of that gratitude than a characterization of praise’s fountainhead in the self-congratulatory pride of the cultured society reader. The eye sees what it wants to see, Clare tells us, and the scenic image is a careful construct, as far from simple observance as a midsummer cushion is from the field where the cottager found it. Time and again, I will show in this essay, Clare turns from the devious simplicity of the eye towards a heightened attention to sound in his poetry to acknowledge its artifice and the active role he is playing in the landscapes he describes.

While’s Clare’s goal of independence for The Midsummer Cushion was not fulfilled in his lifetime, the recent standard editions of Clare’s work, edited directly from the manuscripts by Robinson Powell and P.M.S. Dawson, have provided

22 Ibid., no page.
unadulterated versions of the poems. “Emmonsales Heath” is one such poem. It demonstrates vividly Clare’s ironic use of sound to suddenly make present that which remained concealed in the landscape all along. The beauty of the heath derives from its elaborate emptiness:

Grasses that never knew a scythe
Waves all the summer long
& wild weed blossoms waken blythe
That ploughshares never wrong

Stern industry with stubborn toil
& wants unsatisfied
Still leaves untouched thy maiden soil
In its unsullied pride\(^\text{23}\)

The wild growth of the field exists in relation to the absence of human life, in both natural biological and figurative literary terms. Just as weed blossoms thrive in the absence of husbandry and grasses in the absence of the mower, so do grasses, weed blossoms, and virgin soil come into sharper visual relief through the negation of agricultural instruments and activity. To emphasize the point, Clare uses metonymy (“scythe,” “ploughshares,” “industry,” “toil”) and synecdoche (“wants”) to avoid mentioning a single human presence directly, creating an expanse of foreground in the

poem devoid of human life. But soon even the fixtures of the natural world begin to conceal themselves, questioning the idea of the foreground as a visual space in the mind: “The birds…find their summer shade,” “the poor hare its rushy glade”; and, Clare exclaims to the heath, “there are spots amid thy bowers / Which nature loves to find / Where spring drops round her earliest flowers / Uncheckt by winters wind” until “leaves had nearly hid each tree / And grass greened ancle high.” The changing of summer to fall, fall to winter, and winter to spring deftly signaled by these lines also involves a disappearing act in which description envelops the scene. Visibly observed nature receives an overgrowth of concealing language, its roots in the human presence behind the poem.

In recognition of the sheer attractiveness of the scene, this concealing description relents for a moment. The scene begins to repopulate with the natural forms Clare observes on the heath: “wood bines weave in bowers / To glad the swain sojourning there / & maidens gathering flowers.” Still, the momentum of the poem wants to skip over this visual description as quickly as possible, not only by placing maidens and swains within pockets of shade and shadow—the elements of a described landscape that can also conceal the scene’s natural features—but by dissembling marks of human presence on the heath by personifying them as signs of an apotheosized creation. As a result, Clare follows his humanization of the landscape with the somewhat perplexing claim that “Creations steps ones wandering meets /

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24 MP, 3:364.
26 MP, 3:366.
Untouched by those of man."27 It is as though Clare wants to mythologize the landscape but immediately regrets that this involves populating it with the “swains” and “maidens” of pastoral tradition.

The presence of other human figures in the landscape marks a turn in the poem after which the sound of the heath rises to a crescendo. The final four stanzas of “Emmonsales Heath” turn their attention ultimately away from a literal or mythological vision of the landscape and towards the sound emanating somehow both from deep within and outside of it:

Joy nursed me in her happy moods
& all lifes little crowd
That haunt the waters fields & woods
Would sing their joys aloud

I thought how kind that mighty power
Must in his splendor be
Who spread around my boyish hour
Such gleams of harmony

Who did with joyous rapture fill
The low as well as high
& made the pismires round the hill

27 MP, 3:364.
Seem full as blest as I

Hopes sun is seen of every eye
The haloo that it gives
In natures wide & common sky
Cheers every thing that lives

The forms of nature that Clare has secreted away in pockets of shade and burrow come forth as sound to flood the scrubbed-away visual surface with a music that emanates from the landscape but appears not to be of it. All that is present in the landscape is present as song or harmony, while the sense of sight has been relegated to pure abstraction in the sun of hope seen by all. This narrows the focus of the abstracted creation glimpsed earlier while also refraining from detailed visual description. The sun of hope is distinguished instead by its surreal figuration as a singing or speaking eye, haloo-ing and cheering the natural world.

One of Clare’s “natural history letters,” as the scraps from an aborted natural history of his native Helpstone have come to be called, could stand in for the ending of “Emmonsales Heath,” though one construed in much more concrete terms:

The Fern Owl or Goatsucker or Nightjar or nighthawk while several more or’s might be added to fresh names is a curious bird they are found about us in summer on a wild heath callld Emmingsales & I believe that is the only spot which they visit they make an odd noise in

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the evening beginning at dewfall & continuing it at intervals all night it is a beautiful object in poetic Nature—(nay all nature is poetic) from that peculiarity alone one cannot pass over a wild heath in a summer evening without being stopped to listen & admire its novel & pleasing noise it is a trembling sort of crooing sound which may be nearly imitated by making a crooing noise & at the same time patting the finger before the mouth to break the sound like the stopping the hole in a German flute to quaver a double sound on one note this noise is generally made as it descends from a bush or tree for its prey29

The “it” of “it is a beautiful object of poetic nature” is a janus-faced pronoun; it is more a deictic, split like the “double sound” Clare goes on to describe. The subject of this passage is at first the nighthawk; but then Clare elaborates in such detail on the bird’s noise that it solidifies, becoming both an “object” in Clare’s parlance and the proper subject of Clare’s discourse. There is a sharp distinction between art and nature in this passage. Man makes music as a form of play; the nighthawk sings in defense of its nest or on impulse to attract a mate. Pleasure and necessity perform a dance here in the guise of landscape, the visible and invisible features of which stand in for cold fact while sound marks the entrance of the human being on the scene. A particular quality of sound emerges from the simile of the German flute and the action of a hand slapping an embouchure of human lips. The specificity of the images of sound-making contrasts with the lack of description of the bird or its habitat, appropriate for a poet

whose attention to audible detail likely made him England’s first ethnomusicologist.30

In the objectification of the heath’s sound through a similar density of perception on the poet’s part, Clare reveals the object of his most acute attention to be not the visible features of the landscape but its sound.

Clare’s poetry often confronts a similar contrast between a more literal vision of the untouched landscape and the poetry, which Clare persistently figures as sound, composed by the human presence that interrupts that literal vision. The persistence of this habit of thought over a period of roughly a decade—from the natural history letters to the The Midsummer Cushion—illuminates a strong continuity in the structure of Clare’s poetics. If, as Robinson has asserted, “every poem by Clare about nature is concentrated particularity, like the sun’s beams focused through a burning-glass,” then that particularity comes through most for Clare in qualities of sound and is, moreover, inaptly described by such an optical metaphor.31 In “Emmonsales Heath,” “hopes sun,” in all its abstract symbolism, can hardly be a visible feature of the sky; and its cheering voice is what inspires the emotional quality that gives the symbolic object its name. Further, “life’s little crowd / that haunt the waters fields & woods” do not make

30 Clare collected folk ballads without aid of pen or paper, electing to commit their tunes to aural memory instead of notating them on the spot. See George Deacon, John Clare and the Folk Tradition (London: Sinclair Browne, 1983), 20; cf. Edward Thomas, A Language Not to Be Betrayed: Selected Prose of Edward Thomas, ed. Edna Longley (Manchester, UK: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group/Carcanet Press, 1981), 25–6, for the suggestive claim that “‘A thousand things which the ordinary country child…has to forget in order to live, Clare observed and noted.”

themselves seen or known other than as conduits for that anthropomorphized “mighty power” who sings the joy of existence through them.

Sound’s presence in Clare’s work is his way of acknowledging the human presence in the landscape, while visual description is used by Clare to delay that acknowledgment as long as he can. The humanizing force of Clare’s own sensibility, its effects upon the landscape he described, and Clare’s tendency to recognize those effects in qualities of sound all come across most clearly perhaps in the anecdote of Clare taking John Taylor, his London publisher, on a walk through the Helpstone countryside. Taylor, enthusiastic to see the place that had inspired Clare’s work, ultimately found the scene unremarkable, even ugly.32 Taylor marketed Clare as a peasant poet whose powers of rural description rivaled those of Milton, Thomson, or Theocritus. These were all urban poets whose sensitivity to the ways in which a full encounter with the landscape could be composed as lyric would have been roughly equal to Taylor’s.33 An idealized bucolic vision of the country can be glimpsed but not necessarily heard from the gates of Syracuse; a more personal experience with the land closes the distance between poet and subject matter, offering the possibility for a pastoral poetic vision to be audible as well as visible.


It is instructive to observe how Clare establishes the poet’s presence in the same scene of Emmonsales Heath but in a different poem. The sonnet “Emmonsails Heath in Winter” deploys a common strategy of Clare’s by using one initial governing verb and implying it across many lines:

I love to see the old heaths withered brake
Mingle its crimpled leaves with furze & ling
While the old Heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow & flaps his melancholy wing
& oddling crow in idle motions swing
On the half rotten ash trees topmost twig
Beside whose trunk the gipsey makes his bed
Up flies the bouncing wood cock from the brig
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread

In this passage the first seven lines are governed by the verb “to see” in the first line: “the old heaths withered brake” and “oddling crow in idle motions” are this verb’s primary objects. But the appearance of the human figure, the sleeping gypsy, breaks the breathless pattern of heavily implied sight, and the poem enters into a transitional moment with the next two lines. Suddenly the action of seeing is altogether stopped by the syntax of the simple declarative, “Up flies the bouncing wood cock…” It is as though Clare is acknowledging a reticence to proceed any further after acknowledging the human figure in the landscape. The poet has become shy, and the poem itself

\[34MP, 4:286.\]
begins to stand in for Clare. There is no longer a first person pronoun engaged in
seeing the landscape; instead there is a wood cock flying over a slushy quagmire with
no explicit predication of who is observing this action or how it is being observed.

But the final recognition that someone’s “tread” is causing the wet ground to
shift signals the poet’s presence once more, despite its now deliberately
depersonalized form (“the tread”—not “my tread”). Then the sonnet’s final lines:

The field fare chatters in the whistling thorn
& for the awe round fields & closed rove
& coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain
& hang on little twigs & start again

The end word “thorn” is the only one in the sonnet that does not have a paired rhyme
word in another line, suggesting an abrupt hinge in the sonnet as well as one that Clare
wishes to index through sound. It is a passage also marked by the sudden appearance
of more earthy-sounding dialect words: “field fare” for thrush, “bumbarel” for the
long-tailed tit, and “awe” for the stray stalks of wheat poking up through the snow.

Add to this the chattering of the thrush and the whistling of the wind through the icy
brambles, and one receives the sense of a landscape attempting to communicate,
which is met by a poet attempting to answer back in a language more closely attuned

35 Ibid.
36 For this last, see the definition for “awn” in Anne Elizabeth Baker, Glossary of
Northamptonshire Words and Phrases, 2 vols. (London, 1854), 1:22. Clare is likely
using his own phonetic spelling of the word, or else a common plural form that Baker
neglects to list in her glossary.
to the land. The sonnet presents an arc that swings from visual description of the heath back in on itself as the recognition of the human imprint on the scene comes into focus; then Clare resolves this shy-making tension by coming to terms with the presence of the human figure in the landscape as being one with an imagined capability to communicate with non-human life through sound.

This reading of Clare diverges from that of Barrell, who saw no essential difference between Clare’s use of visual and aural description:

In Clare’s attempts to write properly Thomsonian landscape-poetry, the sounds of the landscape were continually intruding into what should, ideally, have been a purely visual image; but although there are sounds, too, in ‘Emmonsails Heath in winter’—the fieldfare chattering, the wind whistling – they are now not at all obtrusive. The place now appears as a complex of impressions which may equally well be visual or not; and the place would become less a ‘complex manifold,’ less a group of images apprehended as it were simultaneously, if by some arbitrary criterion of propriety non-visual images were still definitely excluded from the poem.37

37 John Barrell, The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 161. Barrell revisited “Emmonsailies Heath in Winter” more recently in a reading that ignores altogether the role played by sound in its structure and reconfigures Clare’s interpretation of the scene as a strictly visual manifold: “the experience of seeing the bracken is connected with the experience of seeing the heron not just because both experiences are pleasurable, but because both are represented as somehow inseparable…And in the same way the experience of seeing the crow is inseparable from these first two experiences, and inseparable also, for the speaker, from the knowledge that, beside the ash-tree on which the crow is perched, a gipsy sometimes sleeps.” See John Barrell,
The emphasis on the complex manifold in Barrell’s theory of Clare’s poetics ignores what can often be traced as a narrative through-line in Clare’s work. In his desire to distinguish Clare’s poetry from Thomson’s, Barrell repeatedly disavowed any attempt on Clare’s part to impose a hierarchy of aesthetic order on the wild land about him. This interpretation has long been influential in Clare studies, most recently for example re-appearing in Potkay’s claim that “for Clare…vision and audition are symbiotic.”38 However, a kind of hierarchy does appear, I have demonstrated, in the very sonnet Barrell singles out to make his point.

Sound plays a crucial role in Clare’s poetics as the sensation through which he expresses his active presence within a described landscape. Clare’s acknowledgment of this presence is always ambivalent: by composing the landscape as sound Clare is able to interact more fully with the scene around him, but he must also acknowledge at such moments the artificial nature of the landscape that he essentially creates. Clare was sensitive to the relationship between sound and poetry, at one point later in his life remarking to one of his visitors at the Northampton asylum that the doctors “…have cut off my head, and picked out all the letters of the alphabet—all the vowels and consonants—and brought them out through my ears; and then they want me to write

\[\text{Poetry, Language, and Politics (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988), 126.}\]

poetry! I can’t do it.”

39 It would be easy to dismiss this comment as lunatic raving if recent scholarship had not so meticulously argued that Clare’s institutionalization was excessive and unnecessary. From the mouth of a sane but vexed and defeated man, the comment can be taken as a kind of *ars poetica*. Clare must, in Ashbery’s terms, “see each note as well as hear it,” but he can do so only after grappling with the imposition of his own presence on the scene he is describing. Visual description and aural description have separate valences in Clare’s work, and the aural dimension of his poetry often comes through at precisely the moment when the visuality of the poem reaches a kind of critical mass. At a certain point, Clare can no longer ignore the fact that all that seeing, all that description, is emanating from a certain perspective. The register then shifts to sound in recognition of the human presence in the landscape in a way that also subdues the harshness of the realization that the landscape is in the process of being “cultivated.” Despite Clare’s outrage at the efforts of others to do so through the process of agricultural enclosure, his poetry contains an awareness of the poet imaginatively engaged with the landscape in ways that alter or distort it. The figure of the poet in the landscape who “love[s] to see” is too passive to register this active presence. Necessarily, sound succeeds sight in order for Clare to work into the poem his own role in the poetic formation of the landscape. Part of the richness of Clare’s work derives from this dynamic of a poet always somewhat naively catching

39 J.W. and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life*, 437. Cf. Goodridge, who unnecessarily reads this as a synesthetic remark, led astray by the assumption that all of Clare’s poetry derives from the sense of sight (John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*, 11).

himself in the act of creating the landscape he only set out to view and describe; and the catch often occurs through the heightening of sound within the poetry.

Clare’s two actual efforts in the *ars poetica* genre, “The Progress of Rhyme” and “Pastoral Poesy,” both also from *The Midsummer Cushion*, provide still more detail on the differing valences of sight and sound in his work. We need look no further than “The Progress of Rhyme” in particular for proof of the centrality for Clare of the dynamic opposition of wildness and cultivation, and the dynamic swing from sight to sound that tracks alongside this opposition in his work. If Wordsworth’s efforts in *The Prelude* might be viewed as an elaborate eighteenth-century “progress of poetry” genre poem, extended into sublime philosophical autobiographical territory, Clare’s “Progress of Rhyme” is an inversion of that formula. As one reads *The Prelude*, the sense gradually dawns that one is witnessing the development of English literary history through the interior unfolding of the microcosm that is a single Englishman: all the major set-pieces of *The Prelude*—the simple country pastimes; the gloomy Oxbridge chapel and debate hall; the angularities and shocking viscera of the London streets; and the resonance of individual experience with broader social forces and features of the landscape on Snowden and Mont Blanc—are, in one way or another, through their various personal, political, cultural, or religious implications, the central themes and contexts shaping much of English poetry. Reading Clare on “The Progress of Rhyme,” however, despite the expectation signaled by its title of a straightforward genre exercise in the manner of Gray or Collins, one encounters Clare’s account of his personal development as a poet without any historical subtext. It is in a way more Wordsworthian than anything Wordsworth wrote while also being a
variation on Clare’s major theme of the relationship between wildness and cultivation. Crucially, “The Progress of Rhyme” marks the moment when Clare most fully “acknowledges that the quality of his poetry depends upon the quality of his relationship to nature” rather than the quality of the natural forms that lie before him; that his poetry “must draw upon insights that are self-won, feelings that are self-affirming, creative instincts that are self-generated.”

In short, it is a poem where we can trace at length Clare’s coming to terms with his own creative presence and its effect upon the landscape.

Out of nowhere, after an initial struggle with his perceived incompetence and lack of worth, as earlier lines in “The Progress of Rhyme” relate, the young Clare is depicted as struck with a confusing sense of himself as a poet upon the publication of his successful first book:

    day shine to my themes did come
    Just as a blossom bursts to bloom
    & finds itself in thorny ways
    So did my musings meet with praise
    & though no garden care had I
    My heart had love for poesy
    A simple love a wild esteem
    As heart felt as the linnets dream
    That mutters in its sleep at night

Some notes from extacy's delight

Thus did I dream o'er joys & lie

Muttering dream-songs of poesy

The strong sales and generally positive reviews that met *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820) appear to sit uneasily with Clare’s conception of himself as a poet of “simple love” and “wild esteem” who has enjoyed “no garden care.” Throughout this passage one finds a considerable effort to maintain an uncultivated appearance: it is “day shine” rather than any horticultural concern that causes the blossom of poetry to burst in Clare; and when the bloom unfolds it does so amid “thorny ways” rather than within a pruned, planted bed. No sooner does Clare’s poetry meet with public regard in this passage than it is figured as a dream-song, a half-conscious muttering in the dark that emanates from outside any meaningful control by the poet.

Evident here is a fear of the external influence on his poetry that Clare up to this point felt he had always been able to avoid. Deploying the romantic metaphor of the illuminating lamp for divine inspiration but with a difference, this passage uses a kind of drab metalepsis in which the concentrated lamplight of inspiration transposes to the diffuse daylight of publication, followed immediately by Clare’s attempts to shun whatever residual light remains with a retreat into metaphorical sound.43 It is well known that the praise that arrived from Clare’s cultured readers in London came

42 *MP*, 3:495–6.
with strings attached, and his resort to the sleep-singing of the linnet may be an early sign of a retreat from the world that would eventually grow deep enough to convince Clare’s contemporaries that he was insane.\textsuperscript{44} Such a turn to sound should be no surprise. As we have seen, this is how Clare registers, in his descriptive nature poetry, a certain wariness of the human presence and its effects on untouched natural space, at the same time that sound also represents the poetic faculty of the human presence. Clare’s use of sound acknowledges that the human presence in the landscape is inextricably involved in acts of cultivation. Wherever the human being goes, artifice necessarily follows, for good and ill. Crossan found in Clare a poet for whom the “scene depicted should be beautiful enough in itself to evoke images... without the artist’s having to impose such images on the landscape.”\textsuperscript{45} But Clare was more honest about the poet’s—and by extension the human being’s—insatiable psychological need to re-make the world in images of his own choosing.\textsuperscript{46}

Elsewhere in “The Progress of Rhyme” Clare imagines poetry as a companion bound so inseparably to him that it accompanies him to the grave. Clare contrasts this image against its more innocent obverse, depicting poetry as a child bound to its creators by their initial looks of love:

\textsuperscript{44} For an especially vivid account of how Eliza Emmerson and Lord Radstock, two of Clare’s more hands-on patrons, made successful attempts to censor his verse, see Bate, \textit{Clare: A Biography}, 197–203; for their multiple attempts to intrude on Clare’s personal life and change his character, see Bate, \textit{passim}.
\textsuperscript{45} Crossan, \textit{A Relish for Eternity}, 51.
\textsuperscript{46} Although she does not provide a reading of Clare, the definitive treatment of this psychological need as an essential component of the theory of poetry is found in Helen Vendler, \textit{The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).
I looked on poesy like a friend
To cheer me till my life should end
Twas like a parents first regard
& love when beautys voice was heard

From a state of innocence to the ultimate experience of death, the poet never ceases transposing the given to the made. The similes that establish this recognition are visual ones ("I looked"); "Twas like a…regard"), but the simile that results from the recognition is aural. Cronin claimed that "Clare is haunted…by a dream that Keats and Shelley also entertained, that a poem might be as natural, as untaught and unpremeditated, as birdsong"; and also that this dream "prompts him in ‘The Progress of Rhyme’ to write poetry not about, but out of the nightingale’s song." But what this final simile acknowledges is the impossibility of writing such a pure, untouched poetry. The shift from the visible to the audible in these four lines registers the weight of the realization: a poet never simply looks on nature and reports its truth to a less subtle audience. A poet looks on poetry alone, which is not really like looking at all but involves an internal recognition of love and beauty that is more like the resonance of sound:

My harp though simple was my own
When I was in the fields alone
With none to help & none to hear
To bid me either hope or fear

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47 MP, 3:493.
48 Richard Cronin, “In Place and out of Place,” 138.
The bird & bee its chords would sound
The air hummed melodys around
I caught with eager ear the strain
& sung the music oer again
Or love or instinct flowing strong
Fields were the essence of the song
& fields & woods are still as mine
Real teachers that are all divine
So if my song be weak or tame
Tis I not they who bear the blame

Where Potkay would read this as evidence in Clare of the “interdependence of nature and culture in human responses to nature and particularly natural music,” I read a much more sharply expressed opposition. Even though there is a joyous interaction and imagined communion with nature evident in these lines, in no sense could their contents be called “naturalistic.” In fact, as Clare demonstrated in his increasingly determined efforts after the composition of *The Midsummer Cushion* to cut the strings attaching him to both the landscape poetry he had become known for and the patrons who made him famous, the poetic dimension of experience has very little to do with careful observation of the natural world.

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50 Adam Potkay, “Ear and Eye,” 192.
51 On Clare’s disastrous move from his native Helpston to a patron-provided cottage in nearby Northborough, which both coincides with the final composition of the *Midsummer Cushion* poems and precipitates Clare’s hospitalization, see Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*, 364–65 and 387–89.
Consequently, Clare’s claim in “The Progress of Rhyme” that “Each object to my ear & eye / Made paradise of poesy” strikes a reader with some confusion, especially when he insists on narrating his poetic development through a process similar to that found in his landscape poetry, in which key elements of the scene are hidden from sight in groves and coverts:

Each old leaning shielding tree
Were princely palaces to me
Where I would sit me down & chime
My unheard rhapsodies to rhyme
All I beheld of grand—with time
Grew up to beautifuls sublime
The arching groves of ancient Limes
That into roofs like churches climb
Grain intertwisting into grain
That stops the sun & stops the rain
& spreads a gloom that never smiles
Like ancient halls & minster aisles
While all without a beauteous screen
Of summers luscious leaves is seen

Again, what’s seen is barely seen, and that little bit eventually transposes to sound.

Clare secrets his younger self away into an old-growth choir stall, a space so shut from

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52 MP, 3:499.
the landscape that it is watertight, anticipating the deprivation of sight and consequent
stirring of sound he finds compatible with poetic vision. Clare is seldom interpreted
for his irony, yet this passage cannot be read faithfully without acknowledging the fact
that Clare seems to be writing otherwise than he intends. References to “All I beheld”
and the “beauteous screen / Of summers luscious leaves [that are] seen” merely
presume the capability of sight in a described environment that is inhospitable to
visibility. This is caused by the older Clare of *The Midsummer Cushion* layering
elements of the remembered landscape outside the bower onto a scene in which the
fictive, youthful Clare feels the need to rhapsodize in darkness. As the older poet of
the “Progress” and the younger poet who is a character within it are the same person,
one can only reach the conclusion that Clare summoned the “Progress” from a vision
that emanated in a darkness similar to that which he constructs for his youthful self;
therefore, the twisting grains of the lime bower and the beautiful screen of its leaves
reveal themselves to be imaginatively rendered rather than directly observed, whether
in Clare’s youth or in middle age. One may add to this ironic doubleness the way in
which syntactic ambiguity causes the constructed visibility of the scene to merge with
the very same poetic activity of sound-making that is responsible for its construction.
Clare sits within the bower and chimes “unheard rhapsodies to rhyme / All I beheld of
grand,” an apposition that suggests the conversion of passive sight to active sound
through the activity of poetry. This sense intensifies as the appositive deepens and
what the poet beheld “—with time / Grew up to beautifuls sublime.” All that Clare
beheld becomes beautiful through the addition not only of rhyme but “time,” or meter,
which gives the older poet an audible order allowing him to reconstruct the scene in
his memory, the mental process of which one may glimpse as the bower’s components figuratively grow “up to beautifuls sublime” around the poem-composing boy.

From within Clare’s bower, the darkened landscape reestablishes its presence for the poet through sound:

When I was in the fields alone
With none to help & none to hear
To bid me either hope or fear
The bird & bee its chords would sound
The air hummed melodys around
I caught with eager ear the strain
& sung the music oer again
Or love or instinct flowing strong
Fields were the essence of the song
& fields & woods are still as mine
Real teachers that are all divine
So if my song be weak or tame
Tis I not they who bear the blame54

As Clare sings the “music oer again” in imitation of the soundscape in the fields, he does so in tribute to the stark inhuman quality of the landscape that offers its comfort in place of the human presence, which has let him down. But the very sense of Clare’s being “in the fields alone / With none to help & none to hear” humanizes the

54 MP, 3:496-97.
landscape with an interpretation of the meaningless sounds of birds and insects as the engagement that Clare never received from village companions who failed to understand his vocation. Clare’s ambiguity on the point of whether “love or instinct” inspires his sonic emulation of the scene is simply a re-phrasing of the theme that reappears throughout Clare’s work, a theme that sees him frequently worrying over the effect his poetic depictions of landscape have on the quality of virgin wildness he values in it. Clare’s tone here is unconcerned to discover a definitive answer to this ambivalence, yet it does matter whether he sings out of love or instinct. If he does so instinctually, then his poetry has as little meaning as the hum of the bee or the cry of the linnet and the consequences of the poet’s presence in the landscape are non-existent. He is a creature among creatures that sings merely as a by-product of its own efforts towards survival. If, however, Clare emulates the landscape out of love, as all admirers of Clare’s poetry and surely Clare himself would have to admit he does, then he imposes not only a human value but perhaps the human value—which carries with it a thousand complex cultural and literary associations—upon an opaque and oblivious material world.

Any complex manifold we encounter in Clare’s poetry is less the aggregate of observed objects in the scene and more the sum total of vexed, anthropic distortions placed in the landscape by the poet as he realizes the significance of his compulsion to write poetry about it. The “chords,” “strains,” “melodys,” “music,” and “song” that Clare hears in the landscape are really indicators of another level of observation on the poet’s part: the difficulty of rendering a humanly recognizable beauty from the impassive material of nature. This is why, for Clare, “Fields were the essence of the
song,” and not the other way around. The poem is a built environment placed on top of the landscape by the imagination—both figuratively and, in the event of publication, literally, in the sense that production of a book of pastoral verse refashions natural material in order to describe it.

A facile reading of Clare would tacitly assume that song was somehow the essence of the open heaths that ringed Clare’s village and that the poet just happened to be sensitive enough to pick up on this. This is also why Clare feels the need to give the disclaimer, “if my song be weak or tame / Tis I not they who bear the blame.” Clare is being honest about his poetic cultivation of the landscape and the fact that his poems do not really represent the scene as he observed it. In the twenty-first century, we are all too accustomed to the idea that the landscape is full of precious objects and that an untouched vista offers untold pleasures for the sensitive observer, likely a product of both late romanticism and a half-century of dawning realization that humans are destroying the natural world that sustains us. But Clare values wildness in the landscape for its lack of beauty, its drab defiance of the symmetrical efforts of the agricultural reformers and the resolute refusal of its random growths and seeming purposelessness to accommodate the hierophantic aesthetics of his poetic contemporaries. This is why Clare’s poetry must continuously represent his struggle at working the often unresponsive material of nature into art. Nature is not only not art, Clare’s entire body of work seems to say, it is somehow the opposite of art or
otherwise opposed to it—a realization that only a poet who has studied nature very closely could arrive at.55

The fields, Clare goes on to claim in “The Progress of Rhyme,”

Are my aids to worship still
Still growing on a gentle tide
Nor foes could mar or friends could guide
Like pasture brooks through sun & shade
Crooked as channels chance hath made
It rambles as it loves to stray
& hope & feeling leads the way56

Significantly, the stretches of wild heath are “aids” to worship, not objects of it, suggesting the raw material of wine and bread rather than any real presence that might be said to reside within them. Clare makes an effort once again to establish the absence of human presence in the landscape in order to preserve his pleasure in its raw, uncultivated appearance, as “Nor foes…or friends” have anything to do with Clare’s “worship” in the fields. The simile that expands on the quality of this worship and its absence of human influence is one of explicit wildness that closes the circle and links the setting of the meditation back to the mental activity inspired by it. Yet this closing of the circle introduces a symmetry that the scene lacks, at last involving


56 MP, 3:497.
Clare’s acknowledgment of the deeply human motivation behind his worship, and finally foregrounding the heath as an aid for simile-formation in the admission that human “hope & feeling” is what really shapes Clare’s interpretation of the scene.

At this point the structure of the observed landscape in the simile gives way to a soundscape in fuller recognition of Clare’s own presence on the heath and his need to infuse the scene with a human meaning that it may not contain in reality:

—Aye birds no matter what the tune
Or ‘croak’ or ‘tweet’—twas natures boon
That brought them joy—& music flung
Its spell oer every mattin sung
& een the sparrows chirp to me
Was song in its felicity
When grief hung oer me like a cloud
Till hope seemed even in her shroud
I whispered poesys spells till they
Gleamed round me like a summers day
When tempests oer my labor sung
My soul to its responses rung
& joined the chorus till the storm
Fell all unheeded void of harm

57 Ibid.
Beauty is not inherent in birdsong. Rather, birdsong is beautiful insofar as it is perceived as human activity, an enchantment that poetry adds to the scene as “music flung / Its spell” over the croaks and tweets descending from the sky at daybreak. This enchantment is necessary, as the birds themselves sing merely instinctually (“twas natures boon / That brought them joy”). All this sound, Clare is careful to distinguish, “to me / Was song in its felicity.” One way to read that couplet is to interpret Clare saying, “I found the sparrow’s chirping to be song-like in the quality of its naïve happiness”; but this runs against the grain of Clare’s thinking about the relationship between nature and art. A more accurate reading would go something like, “even the sparrow’s chirp, despite the obliviously simple state of being that it signifies, can be transformed into human song by the poet.” The four couplets that follow serve as variations on this theme, limning further the distinction between art and nature through the sense of sound. “When tempests oer my labor sung” is a restatement of “When grief hung oer me like a cloud,” though with the distinction that it has now been infused with the song of the poet. And Clare’s response to this doubled predicament is also the same in each case: “I whispered poesys spells till they / Gleamed round me like a summers day” and “My soul to its responses rung / & joined the chorus.” Again the restatement comes with the intensification of perceived music within the landscape: at first the music is implied as one recalls that “spells” referred to the enchantment of music several lines earlier; but then the language of audiomancy drops away and the real real presence of the human being that had been there all along appears, revealing also the influence it has over the representation of the natural world
in poetry. The human soul in its singing makes a summer’s day of a cloudy tempest, transforming the given to the made.

The climax in Clare’s “Progress of Rhyme” arrives with the imitations of birdsong that fill line after line near the poem’s close. But this admired passage is not the uncomplicated celebration of nature that much Clare criticism has made it out to be. First, it should be noted that this tour de force of imitation is prefaced by a kind of musical duel between Clare and an anonymous “cowboy with his oaten straw,” who hears Clare singing in the fields and gives up his own efforts in acknowledgment of defeat:

No more of music then he made
Twas sweet—& when I pluckt the blade
Of grass upon the woodland hill
To mock the birds with artless skill
No music in the world beside
Seemed half so sweet—till mine was tried58

In one of English poetry’s most humble brags, Clare expresses his sympathy for the cow herder, whose fall into silence Clare understands because he too was satisfied with the sounds made from homespun instruments of hay and grass until he felt the experience of composing his own verse and heard it echoing in his inner ear. This episode foregrounds the now familiar dynamic in which Clare first evades human presence in the landscape (the silencing of the cowherd) before being forced to admit

58 MP, 3:499.
his own poetic influence on the same scene (the superiority of Clare’s poetry having a kind of force that de-tunes or puts to shame both sound in the landscape and simple mimetic imitations of it). Clare’s essential honesty causes him to waffle back and forth, weighing and measuring degrees of his improvements on nature against the inspiration nature provided for his own music: “I heard the blackbird in the dell / Sing sweet could I but sing as well / I thought until the bird in glee / Seemed pleased & paused to answer me” represents this characteristic swerve in Clare’s thought process.59

By the time readers arrive at the birdsong passage in the “Progress,” Clare has already raised difficult questions about imitation and inspiration with respect to the ways his music differs from that of the birds’ (and, for that matter, from other bird-like sounds of human origin). This passage can give contemporary readers a shock accompanied by an uncanny sense of how avant-garde it appears, a kind of Dadaist exercise far avant la lettre. But given the efforts Clare has just made in the poem to distinguish his music from that of birds, its direct mimetic display of Clare’s poetic prowess is surprising also for more immediate formal and thematic reasons:

—& nightingales O I have stood

Beside the pingle & the wood

& oer the old oak railing hung

To listen every note they sung

& left boys making taws of clay

59 Ibid.
To muse & listen half the day
The more I listened & the more
Each note seemed sweeter then before
& aye so different was the strain
She’d scarce repeat the note again
—‘Chew-chew chew-chew’ & higher still
‘Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer’ more loud & shrill
‘Cheer-up cheer-up cheer-up’—& dropt
Low ‘Tweet tweet jug jug jug’ & stopt
One moment just to drink the sound
Her music made & then a round
Of stranger witching notes was heard
As if it was a stranger bird
‘Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur
‘Woo-it woo-it’—could this be her
‘Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew
‘Chew-rit chew-rit’—& ever new
‘Will-will will-will grig-grig grig-grig’
The boy stopt sudden on the brig
To hear the ‘tweet tweet tweet’ so shrill
Then ‘jug jug jug’ & all was still

\[60 \textit{MP}, 3:499–500.\]
What is one to make of the fact that Clare only once refers to the birdsong he imitates here as sweet, otherwise relating its loudness, inconsistency, strangeness (twice), shrillness (twice), the sharp contrasts of its pitch, etc.? Perhaps initially Clare runs into the woods to listen out of some aesthetic compulsion, but he quickly confronts the strangeness of birdsong. “Each note seemed sweeter then before” in direct correlation with how alienating the birdsong becomes, ultimately estranging the nightingale from its own song, “as if it was a stranger bird” ventriloquizing a different species just as Clare is doing. Within the passage Clare comes to appreciate birdsong not as an intuitive cry from the natural world that just happens to appeal to the human ear; instead, he depicts the nightingale’s music as a fully formed art cultivated and known only by the bird. It is a fiction, and he recognizes it as such in the parallel he constructs between himself and the bird as imitators and makers of fictions. Obviously, the bird does not compose. It has no craft. However, Clare constructs the scene in this way to dramatize his realization that people appreciate birdsong only by reading human activity into the life of nature. It is no accident that the activity Clare engages in before sneaking off to listen to the nightingale is the molding of marbles out of clay with other boys from Helpston. This activity is associated not only with associations of biblical creation but also with the earliest forms of art-making known to human beings.\[61\] Clare discovers the elemental aspect of these boys’ activity before locating a more intense iteration of it by listening to the bird. He is attracted to the old

\[61\] I do not wish to suggest that Clare possessed a sophisticated knowledge of art history—he wore his lack of education as a mark of distinction in his writing. But Clare certainly knew the Bible well, and he was friendly with many artists during his brief period of fame in London.
oak railing that marks the bound of the village from the wood not because birdsong is different in kind from marble-making but rather out of an uncanny recognition that it is different only in degree.

Clare’s great challenge here is to render, in contrast to Keats, the strangeness of the nightingale’s song while also preserving its integrity as a distinct kind of music and signification specific to the bird. “Ode to a Nightingale” is a massive imaginative effort to bridge the distance between the human and animal worlds—Keats enters the dark bower of his mind from which the bird sings and begins to describe its verdure—but Clare keeps the nightingale hidden throughout his poem just as he would have the scene void of any human presence. Moreover, Keats’s admiration of the nightingale derives in part from the bird’s instinctive naïveté. Elsewhere Clare recognizes that this quality of nature vexes him in his efforts to draw inspiration from it. But in this passage from the “Progress” Clare cultivates the bird, so to speak, as a tribute to the birdsong that awes him.

After abandoning the boys sculpting marbles, Clare cannot avoid the fact that his is now the dominating animate presence in the scene, just as it is in so much of his nature poetry. As Clare fashions his birdsong, he also foregrounds its difference from human experience. Foremost, this difference is established in the interleaving of lines of birdsong with lines of human language; but Clare establishes this difference also by the way in which the iambic tetrameter breaks down in the lines attributed to the bird. Without a recording to determine the accents, no reader but Clare could possibly know how to scan these lines. And that is the point: They are not any kind of language or music that we know. But Clare’s representation of them in all their weirdness is his
way of suggesting that he and the nightingale are up to similar things in their music making. Here Clare is the listener rather than the singer, and the turn from the first to the third person at the end of the passage is the key to what is happening. The nightingale, Clare hints, is taking in the scene and reconstructing it through its own music-making habits in the same way that Clare has done as a poet in his work and in scene after scene of “The Progress of Rhyme.” There is a gulf between the bird and the poet in the formal elements and the meaning of their respective arts, but the purpose of their compositions is the same: to fix the scene in the mind in a more vivid and personal way than the line of sight could accomplish. As the “boy stopt sudden on the brig / To hear the ‘tweet tweet tweet’ so shrill,” one realizes that the scene is being imagined from the perspective of the nightingale. At the same time that we now glimpse Clare listening at the bridge railing, we see him from deep in whatever grove the bird is hidden. This too enhances the parallel: several dozen lines earlier in the “Progress,” we saw, Clare depicted himself in a similarly secluded spot, singing his first songs. The boy is the bird, and the bird is the boy, as far as their music making is concerned, Clare wants to say; and yet he also wishes to preserve the utter incommensurability of what each is up to. Sound provides Clare with the means of fixing his memories in their most vivid formation, yet it opens up a host of difficult encounters with the representational challenges of poetry and the differences that persist between the realms of nature and the realms of art.

“Pastoral Poesy” continues Clare’s meditations on the meaning of the poet’s presence in the landscape. It does so not by distinguishing the poet from nature so much as distinguishing the poet’s mode of perception from that of others in their
encounters with both landscape and poem. “True poesy is not in words / But images
that thoughts express,” asserts Clare, intimating a reversal of the pattern we have come
to expect from him whereby the words of the poem, figured as music, come to stand in
more meaningfully for natural forms or images drawn directly from the scene of a
landscape. But we continue to read that these “images” are those “By which the
simplest hearts are stirred / To elevated happiness,” an activity that does not require
poetry as an intermediary. Clare is not treating what we would recognize as “Pastoral
Poesy” here so much as the encounter between the non-poet and the landscape, which
is governed by the visual sense and suffices for poetry among the unlettered: “Mere
books would be but useless things / Where none had taste or mind to read / Like
unknown lands where beauty springs / & none are there to heed.”62 For most people,
taking in the vista of a beautiful landscape is far more captivating than any artistic
representation of it would be. But such visual perception is only instantaneously
captivating and lacks the permanence of the “useless” books of poetic meditations on
landscape that seem useless to most people. The quatrain ends on a plaintive note
rather than a dismissive one: Clare is among those compelled to open those volumes
of “unknown lands where beauty springs,” and he laments that few give them any
heed.

In the absence of poetic knowledge, it is sufficient to heed the forms one
encounters in nature:

But poesy is a language meet

62 MP, 3:581.
& fields are every one's employ

The wild flower neath the shepherd's feet
Looks up & gives him joy

A language that is ever green
That feelings unto all impart
As awthorn blossoms soon as seen
Give may to every heart

The pictures that our summer minds
In summers dwellings meet
The fancys that the shepherd finds
To make his leisure sweet

The dust mills that the cowboy delves
In banks for dust to run
Creates a summer in ourselves
He does as we have done

An image to the mind is brought
Where happiness enjoys
An easy thoughtlessness of thought
& meets excess of joys

Nevertheless, the idea that “poesy is a language meet,” or one adapted to particular needs and circumstances, leads to a sense that the visual encounter with nature is second-best. There are two pastoral modes, Clare suggests, one primarily visual and one that is not. For “Pastoral Poesy” is itself a poem, yet its opening lines treat experiences that arrive at their fullest effects in the absence of poetry: the wild flower “looks up” at the shepherd and “gives him joy” while the blossoming hawthorns “soon as seen / Give may to every heart.” If poetry is merely the “pictures that our summer minds / In summers dwellings meet,” then there is a one-to-one correspondence between the visual experience of nature and the experience of beauty that voids the need for poetry qua poetry altogether. Raymond Williams read Clare’s claim that “[poesy is] A language that is ever green” as faith in the idea that a common way of feeling might also serve as a way of writing. But the overriding passivity of the experiences described here suggests that these common modes of feeling are also common modes of forgetting (“an image to the mind is brought”; the shepherd is given joy and the heart “may” by the hawthorn blossom”). Such responses to nature are too insubstantial and aleatory to qualify as poetic expression. There is no active effort on the shepherd’s part to recompose the scene, to cultivate it as a memory whose heightened form gives it coherence as truth good for a thousand years. Such “easy thoughtlessness of thought” associated with all this poetic looking at nature generates “excess of joys” in the moment, but the scene ultimately disintegrates

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63 *MP*, 3:581–82.
64 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, 139–40.
around the object of sight: “The world is in that little spot / with him—& all beside / Is nothing all a life forgot / In feelings satisfied.”65

As the presence of the poet succeeds the presence of the shepherd in the landscape, however, the sensorium shifts from the visual to the aural. Along with this shift, the sense of the word “poesy” as Clare uses it in the poem’s title and in its lines also begins to shift. No longer does the word refer to pictures in the mind derived from sight; instead Clare converts that which he sees to an aural register:

& whether it be hill or moor
I feel where e’er I go
A silence that discourses more
Then any tongue can do

Unruffled quietness hath made
A peace in every place
& woods are resting in their shade
Of social loneliness66

Even silence, as it “discourses,” has a sound for Clare, while he perceives the hills and moors not in terms of their visual contents but the extent of their participation in this expressive silence. The woods are somehow encompassed by the shade that they produce, receding from sight so that the silence of the scene may further expand. This is both the quiet that precedes a storm and the heavy pause in an orchestra pit before a

65 MP, 3:582.
66 Ibid.
musical performance begins—a performance, significantly, to which the shepherd is deaf. “…summer fields when run away / In weeds of crimson hue / Will simple shepherds’ hearts imbue / With natures poesy,” but Clare wants to distinguish his experience in the landscape from the simple shepherd’s dazzle at the fields’ color:

The storm from which the shepherd turns
To pull his beaver down
While he upon the heath sojourns
Which autumn bleaches brown

Is music aye & more indeed
To those of musing mind
Who through the yellow woods proceed
& listen to the wind

The poet in his fitful glee
& fancys many moods
Meets it as some strange melody
& poem of the woods

It sings and whistles in his mind
& then it talks aloud

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67 MP, 3:583.
While by some leaning tree reclined
He shuns a coming cloud

That sails its bulk against the sun
A mountain in the light
He heeds not for the storm begun
But dallys with delight

& now a harp that flings around
The music of the wind
The poet often hears the sound
When beauty fills the mind\textsuperscript{68}

The storm is “music aye & more indeed” to the poet than to the shepherd, who does all he can to shut it out from his perception of the scene. The real “poem of the woods” reveals itself in the audible features of the storm, which in turn begin to sing and whistle in the poet’s mind as the notes of pastoral verse. Whereas earlier, the unlettered shepherd ignored the books that might mediate his experience of the landscape, the poet now is blind to the chiaroscuro of the storm’s cloud system as it interacts with the mountains. The poet “heeds not for the storm begun” but is only heedful of the “music of the wind” which, whipping through the grass and trees,

\textsuperscript{68} MP, 3:582–83.
makes an instrument of the whole world and makes the human hearer a poet as a more permanent “beauty fills the mind.”
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