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Listening with the Romantics

James Castell and Francesca Mackenney

The history of Romantic listening is a history of change and responsiveness to change. Both soundscapes and modes of listening were shifting throughout the period that we now call Romantic (Perry 3), shaped by new forms of attention, new technologies and new environments (Grande and Raz 1-12). Given such unstable terrain, how can we begin to investigate the ways in which Romantic conceptions of the sound of nature have shaped our sense of environmental awareness? In what follows, we argue that listening in the Romantic period was often understood as an active skill as well as an art, one that could be learned or fall into disuse, and one that many Romantic writers sought to finetune through continued acts of listening and textual recording (Castell et al, 5-7). Such practices shaped the environmental awareness of poets and writers in various ways in the Romantic period, sharpening their sense of what might be lost, as well as gained, in the translation of raw sound into written words. Romantic listening also continues to have an impact on the ways that we conceptualize and listen to the sound of nature in our own moment of ecological crisis. To test this, we explore Romantic attentiveness to sound as a transhistorical phenomenon and demonstrate its connection to developing traditions of environmental awareness through a creative experiment: a series of sound walks in the present day which reimagine the practice of listening and writing undertaken by writers such as John Clare and the Wordsworths. Our sound walks were designed, above all, to provide an opportunity for participants to engage in an extended period of active listening. However, their context and structure also encouraged reflection upon the continuities and discontinuities between our practices of listening and those of the Romantics. In both the walks and in the texts themselves, we find a consistent variousness of response not only in Romantic modes of listening to the sounds of nature, but also in how we continue to listen with them.

John Clare's poetry was particularly attuned to change, a record not only of the shifting sands of shifting sounds, but also of how one might translate and represent them in language. Take, for example, the fragmentary lines written later in Clare's life and often titled "Pleasant Sounds":

The rustling of leaves under the feet in woods and under hedges
The crumping of cat ice and snow down wood-rides, narrow lanes and every street
causeway
Rustling thro a wood or rather rushing, while the wind hallows in the oak tops like thunder;
The rustle of birds' wings startled from their nests or flying unseen into the bushes
The whizzing of larger birds overhead in a wood, such as crows, paddocks, buzzards, &c,
The trample of robins & woodlarks on the brown leaves, and the patter of squirrels on the
green moss;
The fall of an acorn on the ground, the pattering of nuts on the hazel branches as they fall
from ripeness;
The flirt of the ground-lark's wing from the stubbles—how sweet such pictures on dewy
mornings when the dew flashes from its brown feathers!
(Clare, *Later Poems*, 570)

These lines also appear set out as prose in Clare's *Natural History Prose Writings* (341)

and are fairly frequently anthologized, as well as being quoted by Robert Graves in a celebrated *Hudson Review* piece from 1955 (103). But they have received comparatively little critical attention. It is worth quoting them in their entirety, however, because of their characteristic abundance and sonic dynamism. It is not difficult to find examples of the sound of nature in the archive of Romantic period writing. They are to be found extensively, and Clare's lines offer a representative range of interconnected sonic agents. The "rustling of leaves" is caused by "feet in woods", and the same word is deployed to describe the "rustle of birds' wings" as they are startled from their nests by other beings moving through the landscape. There is no doubting the "acute [...] sensitivity of [Clare's] personal inner sound recorder" as Seán Street has neatly put it (146). Clare's representation of sound is characterised by remarkable precision: birds "whizz" and "trample" as well as rustle, and a further repetition of the word "rustling" is also revised to "rushing" as the lines unfold with characteristic lexical particularity.

Sound is not limited to the usual avian suspects in this passage, however. Feet can also be heard "crumping" through snow and cat ice (or "thin ice of a milky white appearance in shallow places, from under which the water has receded" (*OED*)). Squirrels "patter" on the green moss. An acorn falls to the ground. Nuts are also "pattering" on hazel branches. Different sounds are connected into a soundscape by embedded relations between different actors, as well as by the material components of language itself, especially the repetition of words like "rustle" and "patter". However, the sounds are also distinguished by Clare's exacting delineations about the sonic agents and the objects of resonance. The same word "patter" may be used, but his care in representing the sound of a squirrel's feet on soft green moss and the sound of hazelnuts "pattering" on branches means that similarity or harmony between sounds does not spill over into exact identity or homogeneity. Clare's soundscape is both rich in its polyphony and scrupulous in its representation of the literal and figurative relations between the constituent parts that make it up. Thanks to the medium of language, the translation of this winter soundscape into poetry draws disparate sounds together synchronically, but it is also a diachronic unfurling of dynamic elements. In other words, Clare's poetry offers a particular sensitivity to the fact that, as Makis Solomos has written, channelling both Michel Chion and Agostino Di Scipio, "sound is an *event*" (97). This soundscape draws attention not only to the sounds that make up a broader soundscape, but also how those sounds make things happen and, consequently, change over time.

The multiplicity of change represented in even this single winter scene connects to the social and environmental changes that Clare recorded across his lifetime (Mackenney, 'Stranger Notes' 31-2). Clare's sensitivity to change may help us to think more sensitively about changes between the soundscapes that he heard and the sounds of our time. But it should also draw our attention to the fact that, as soundscapes change over time, our ways of listening change, as well as our reasons for listening both to the things that we hear and for the things that we might no longer find sounding. There are continuities and gaps – various acts of translation – which occur between sounds and listeners. Such continuities and discontinuities can occur within the soundscapes themselves, between a writer listening and the soundscape being listened to, or between attempts to listen to soundscapes across time: the sort of listening that a literary critic might perform, for example, where a listener listens to an act of listening from a different moment in history. Even beyond these acts of listening, there is also a history of critical thinking about those acts of listening and their reception which ought now to

be seen as part of that history, as themselves historical acts of *listening to listening* which also continue to shape how we listen in the present day.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's celebrated conversation poem on "The Nightingale", there is a sense that the development of speech might inhibit the capacity or willingness to listen, and that the inarticulate infant might in this sense have something to teach the poet and the man:

My dear Babe,
Who, capable of no articulate sound,
Mars all things with his imitative lisp,
How he would place his hand beside his ear,
His little hand, the small forefinger up,
And bid us listen!
(Wordsworth and Coleridge, "The Nightingale", *Lyrical Ballads* lines 91-96)

The poet's son is in some ways more finely attuned to the notes of the nightingale, his childish babble closer to the wordless song of birds than the articulate language of his elders. But his "imitative lisp" (line 93) is nonetheless a harbinger of things to come: the naming of notes and the wording of poems, the marking or marring of the sounds of nature when translated into human modes of signification. Human words inevitably alter the sounds they seek to represent, while the propensity to imitate will lead "youths and maidens most poetical" (line 35) to echo unthinkingly the worn-out conceits of poets as opposed to listening to the bird itself. Coleridge's poem voices a concern about the dominance of speaking over listening, and words over nature, though his own evocations of the nightingale's "fast thick warble" (line 45) open out the possibility of a more reciprocal relationship between listening to birds and experimenting with words in tuneful order. In spite or perhaps because of their worries about words, several poets in the Romantic period came to perceive listening as a skill that could be learned, developed or neglected over time – one that they actively sought to finetune in and through their writing.

In his influential account of the "counteracting senses" of sight and sound in Romantic poetry, Adam Potkay analyses numerous texts in which the "I/eye and their basis in empiricism and technology are offset by *hearing*" which contrastingly serves to "*attach* us to a world that exceeds linguistic or scientific comprehension or control" (180). But there are different ways of seeing, just as there are different ways of listening. To see may be to survey, to analyze or to assert control over the landscape, but it is also to notice, to value and to delight in the changing colours and hues of external nature (Stafford 21-31) – "to see & value what the herd pass by" in Clare's own phrase ("A Woodland Seat", *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: line 33). To listen may in some rare instances be to "attach us to a world" beyond our understanding, but Clare understood that not everyone listens in the same way. For many writers in this period, listening to nature is a skill learned and patiently developed through careful study under – and sometimes in spite of – various environmental, social and individual conditions. It is a skill which Wordsworth, Clare and various other poets in this period trace back to their own boyish endeavours to mock the notes of birds. And it is also one that they actively sought to nurture and develop in the younger generation: "I'll teach my boy the sweetest things / I'll teach him how the owlet sings" (Wordsworth, "The Mad Mother", *Lyrical Ballads* lines 81-2).

"Boys know the note of many a bird", writes Clare in "The Landrail" (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: line 21). Clare's lines recall the thrill of bird-nesting boys, while his various descriptions of birds raising "a plaintive note of danger nigh" censure the predacious instincts he perceived as traceable in boys and grown-up hunters of birds and their eggs ("The Nightingales Nest", *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: line 68). Boys in this period were able to track birds by their sounds, while the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries abound in accounts of bird-catchers who learned to imitate the notes of birds expertly to decoy them into their nets (Mayhew 3: 14-15; Mackenney, *Birdsong* 20-37). Listening can in this way be an attempt to track, to hunt or to control: this common cultural practice may have helped to initiate a responsiveness or attachment to the sounds of nature, though not exactly in the way that Potkay describes or that Coleridge celebrates in his poem. Enclosure, trespassing laws and the implementation of the Wild Birds Protection Acts placed greater restrictions on this popular pastime (Rowe 98), in ways that may have inhibited the predatory practices of bird-nesting boys, but also their auditory skills and "out of door knowledge", to borrow Edward Thomas's phrase (Thomas 14). These are skills that Thomas perceived as in decline in the twentieth century and that remarkably few children in England now possess (Weston), as Romantic efforts to nurture alternative and more sympathetic modes of listening have been outmatched by various other curricular priorities over the centuries.

Many writers in the Romantic period express an anxiety concerning a decline in auditory skills, variously attributed to industrialization, urbanization, a developing taste for other kinds of entertainment – "ballrooms and hot theatres" (Coleridge, "The Nightingale", *Lyrical Ballads* line 36) – along with rises in literacy that risked a closer acquaintance with books than with nature itself. Relative listening skills might also mark changing divisions between town and country. Clare will have his fun with two touring Londoners whom he hears "lavishing praise" upon the song of a nightingale "which happened to be a thrush" (*Natural History Prose* 37). Jokes at the Londoner's expense are common, even as Romantic poets from rural backgrounds often overlook or downplay the knowledge and skill of the many catchers and keepers of birds that surrounded the capital (Mayhew 2: 62). Clare and Wordsworth each censured the predacious behaviour of boys, but they felt that the excitement and skills that they honed in early life were crucial to their development as poets – and they worried that such skills could no longer be taken for granted among the next generation.

Ways of listening were changing in this period, but the Romantics were also aware of – and concerned about – how the soundscape itself was changing in their own times. Urban noise is typically presented as a threat to rural sounds, along with a corresponding sense of harmony. Famously, William Hogarth presented a comical picture of *The Enraged Musician* (1741), who stands with his fingers in his ears to block out the cacophony of street urchins, musicians and hawkers bawling by his window. In the countryside, the soundscape was also changing. Clare's poems invite his readers to listen to the "old wood lands legacy of song" ("The Nightingales Nest", *Poems of the Middle Period* 3: line 93), but they also warn that this legacy is under constant threat from human intruders: "But when her nest is found she stops her song" ("Birds in Alarm", *Poems of the Middle Period* 5: line 11). By the 1830s and 1840s, naturalists such as William Yarrell were directly attributing the decline or extinction of many species to "the progress of draining, and the consequent extension of agriculture" (3: 169). The concern with listening in this period is in part born of an anxiety about how the soundscape was changing in ways not considered especially conducive to nature, poetry or mental peace.

As a result, the Romantic period is also marked by a corresponding desire to record what may have felt like increasingly evanescent soundscapes. Despite attempts to use other means, language nevertheless remained the principal way of recording natural soundscapes in the centuries before the advent of audio technologies. An eager listener as well as an avid reader of natural history, Clare may be seen actively engaging with – and seeking to develop – ways of representing sounds in words. For example, his prose writings include an extended attempt to describe the sound of the bittern or “butterbump” (as the bird was locally known):

This is a thing that makes a very odd noise morning & evening [...] among the flags & large reed shaws in the fens some describe the noise as something like the bellowing of bulls but I have often heard it & cannot liken it to that sound at all in fact it is difficult to describe what it is like its noise has procurd it the above name by the common people the first part of its nose is an indistinct muttering sort of sound very like the word butter utterd in a hurried manner & bump comes very qui[i]ck after [...] & bumps a sound on the ear as if eccho had [...] mockd the bump of a gun just as the mutter ceasd nay this is not like I have often thought the putting ones mouth to [...] the bung hole of an empty cask & uttering the word ‘butter bump’ sharply woud imitate the sound exactly after its first call that imitates the word ‘butter bump’ it repeats the sound bump singly several times in a more determind & loud\er/ manner -- thus \‘butter bump bump bump butter bump’ it strikes people at first as something like the sound of a coopers mallet hitting on empty casks when I was a boy this was one of the fen wonders (*Natural History Prose* 89).

As Karen Swann observes, Clare is directly addressing natural historians such as J. Macloc, who compared the sound to “the interrupted bellowings of a bull” in a volume included in Clare’s library (Macloc 229). Testing such descriptions against his own direct experiences of the sound (“I have often heard it & cannot liken it to that sound at all”), Clare turns to the folk names and myths of “common people”. The bird’s local name verges on self-parody, seemingly delightfully aware of its own nonsensicalness (whatever the bittern may be saying, it almost certainly has little or nothing to do with the common household item butter). Clare’s own renderings of the sounds are in keeping with this tradition: they playfully point up the absurdity of imposing human words upon an animal beyond our ken, while they also resist the kind of aesthetic judgements evident in Macloc’s account of the “terrific solemnity” of the bittern’s call (229). Clare emulates the sounds, while likening those sounds to common household objects with a homely and playful inventiveness.

When the sounds of birds are translated into human words, the words shift into rhythm: Clare repeats and stresses his syllables, in ways which finely capture how the bird repeats “the sound bump singly several times in a more determined & loud\er/ manner”. Clare in his poetry faces the added difficulty of having to fit the sounds of birds to metre (nightingales do not sing in iambic pentameter): his rendering of the bittern’s voice is free of this difficulty, though his prose slips into musical, poetic or “extra-semantic” modes of expression (repetition, rhythm, stress) to elongate and emulate its voice. The semantic sense of words descends into nonsense, even as patterns of sound seem at once to express and enkindle complex states of feeling – the urgency of the bittern’s “more determined & loud\er/ manner”.

Swann rightly points out that Clare's rendering of the butter bump celebrates "the excess that identification fails to contain" (n.p.). But even as he acknowledges the limits of taxonomic systems and language itself, Clare's writing is a compelling example of how the act of writing can deepen and enhance the poet's skills in listening and attending to the sounds of nature. Reading the words of others sets up a contrast and conflict between the words themselves and the sound they seek to convey. This conflict leads to critique as well as creativity, as it causes the poet to analyze and dispute the words of others as well as to experiment with form. Getting it wrong ("nay this is not like") acknowledges the limitations of words, but it also drives the poet to pause, to analyze, to listen again and to try something new. It leads to reflection on the aptness of a simile or the aesthetic judgments of others, and, in doing so, it raises awareness of the cultural attitudes and personal tastes that shape individual responses to the sounds of the more-than-human world. These are sounds that endlessly resist, but also consequently inspire and spur on the poet's efforts to translate them into words. For all its apparent limitations, the medium of language can in this way urge both poets and readers to attend more closely to the sounds they mark or mar.

Clare concludes his reflections on the different ways in which the sounds of the bittern have been interpreted in folklore and natural history, oral and written traditions, with the statement that "the world gets wiser every day" (*Natural History Prose* 90). Clare is aware not only of changes in the soundscape, but also of how ways of listening have changed over time. And progress, as Clare archly notes, is never straightforward. The rise of literacy and natural history in the poet's own times displaced oral traditions and a superstitious belief that the bittern's booming was made by "a bird larger then an ox that coud kill all cattle in the fen if it choose" (*Natural History Prose Writings* 90). Such change might not always be uncomplicatedly linked to narratives of progress. Clare smiles at the "power of superstition" (90), though its decline is also linked to the loss of a kind of poetic feeling or imaginative response to the sounds: "'tis not believd now nor heard as a wonder any longer" (90). The decline of superstition is also the decline of that sense of "wonder", though the poet's closing critique of "ignorant people who have no desire to go beyond hearsay & inspect for themselves" might be aimed as much at naturalists, such as Macloc, as at the superstitions of the lower classes (90).

Clare's listening underscores the dynamic exchange between hearing and writing, the sounds of nature and the sounds of poetry. The absence of recording technology demanded and enabled a different kind and quality of environmental awareness in the Romantic period, one that was as methodologically various and temporally dynamic as the objects of its attention. As Alexandra Hui has put it with admirable succinctness, "ways of listening are historical, churning and changing over time" (1378). In his efforts to capture the call of the bittern in words, Clare listened differently to modern listeners armed with new forms of recording equipment and new tools for analysis. Apps like Merlin by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and a proposed new GCSE in Natural History in England are also seeking to revive the identification of birds by the sounds they make. But it remains to be seen whether it is possible for them to teach those other modes of listening that Clare developed in and through his attempt to "syllable the sounds" of the nightingale (*Natural History Prose Writings* 312).

When we listen with the Romantics, we must be attentive not only to the continuities and discontinuities between the soundscapes of their time and those of the contemporary moment. We must also be aware of the continuities and discontinuities between their historical modes of listening and our own. We listen not only to the past, but also to processes of historical consonance and difference. Such listening becomes

even more acute when faced with periods of rapid change in the environments where soundscapes occur. Makis Solomos notes that sound "is what connects us to our environment, both auditory and non-auditory, and to the world. We *inhabit* sound, just as we inhabit the earth" (99). He also identifies that perhaps one of the most influential theorists of soundscapes, R. Murray Schafer has "concerns" that primarily "are ecological" (100). Solomos identifies that "a large portion of [Schafer's] book is devoted to the issue of pollution" (100), what we might call noise. Sound has certainly been used to measure environmental degradation (see Castell 25-6). However, as our analyses in this article and volume indicate, Romantic listening offers a broader range of aesthetic responses to the sound of various environments. Like Michele Speitz in a special issue on "Romanticism and Sound Studies: Recording Romantic Relationality", we hope to contribute to further "conversations for scholars and readers of Romantic-era literature and culture" which "consider a wider assortment of representations of sounds, silences, voices, calls, quietudes, volumes, modes of listening, sensing, and interpreting sonic experiences, including human and nonhuman sound-bound relations" (n.p.). In the two articles focussed on Romantic period literature in this special issue, even the poetry of two of the most canonical figures in proto-environmental poetry – William Wordsworth and John Clare – serves to underscore both the diversity and the unexpectedness of Romantic listening, as well as how they continue to shape environmental thinking beyond their own moment.

As we have already explored, Coleridge counsels us to hear nightingale song differently and Romantic writing is often about reshaping traditions of listening in response to changing circumstances. But listening to Romantic listening also has its own critical history, where different preoccupations and different writers take on differing significances over time. To take one obvious example, it would not have always seemed that Clare's writing would become as central as it has now become to Romantic ecocriticism (see Kövesi). The connection between Romanticism and proto-environmental thinking has, by now, its own history. As Jeremy Davies has brilliantly explored, there are now several established critical narratives which connect Romantic literature and thinking with the environment (1-11). To draw a few examples from his excellent work, there is one which draws a straightforward connection between Romantic literature and the establishment of conservation institutions in the nineteenth century as well as the mindsets which help create them (see, most obviously, Bate). More theoretically, there are critics who see in Romantic writing an anticipation of – or prelude to – more contemporary forms of thinking about the diversity or strangeness of what we now call the environment. Timothy Morton's work on Romanticism beyond the concept of "ecology without nature" might be one example of this. In other words, there is not only breadth and unexpectedness in how Romantic writing represents sound, but also in how it shapes environmental awareness. Our environmental awareness is shaped by a tradition inherited from the Romantics and their modes of listening; but we also live in a world facing fundamentally different ecological challenges. In significant ways, we continue to listen through the ears of the Romantics, but we also listen with different ones. Soundscapes are evanescent and dynamic things, which change over time and are made up of varied sounds. In the Romantic period as today, the sounds of humanity and culture were tangled up with the sound of nature, not separate from it. Such complexity allows us not only to see something familiar or foundational in Romantic poetry's contribution to the history of environmental awareness. It also grants us an insight into the dynamic historiography of environmental awareness itself.

"Hark" is a word often used by Coleridge, Clare and other Romantic poets, as they invite readers to listen with them. To hark is to "to give ear or listen to; to hearken to, hear with active attention" (*OED*). The word is steeped in biblical tradition, connecting with the prophets and saints who urge their followers to attend to their words, to the teachings of God and to the sounds of creation: "Hark! a tumult in the mountains, like as of a great people" (Isiah 13:4). In Romantic poetry, the imperative similarly reads as a command, in ways that call attention to the poet's role in prompting and guiding the reader's responses to the sound of nature: "Hark there she is as usual lets be hush", writes Clare in "The Nightingales Nest" (*Poems of the Middle Period* 3: line 42; also see Mackenney, 'Stranger Notes' 34-6). The interjection insists that the sounds of nightingales and owlets are things worth attending to, as are implicitly – of course – the poems in which those sounds are recorded and rendered into words. The word also creates a sense of immediacy, in poems which insist that the poet is drawing our attention to a sound that is supposedly happening now, as they write and as we read. As Speitz points out, in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" the reiterated call of the owl interrupts the speaker as he is describing the sounds he has heard: "—and hark, again! Loud as before" (Speitz n.p.). But this sense of immediacy may seem increasingly like the illusion it has always been, when cars, roads, railways, recording technologies and the environmental crisis have fundamentally altered what and how we hear in our own times. In other words, the illusory quality of aesthetic tropes or idealized soundscapes is underlined by historical comparison, a practice which was also intentionally embedded into a series of sound walks that we undertook with a group of other Romanticists in the Lake District.

On a drizzly day in February 2024, a small, intrepid group gathered to walk and listen together in Grasmere in an experiment designed to explore if and how readers today might listen with the Romantics. A sound walk in winter was in some ways far from ideal, though we took inspiration from poets and writers who found themselves in this season attending more closely to the "slender notes" of the redbreast and "pendent drops of ice, / That tinkle in the wither'd leaves below" (Cowper, vi, lines 76-85). Cowper's lines clearly came to Dorothy Wordsworth's mind, as she walked with her brother and Coleridge at Alfoxden in the winter of 1798: she noted "a deep stillness in the thickest part of the wood, undisturbed except by the occasional dropping of the snow from the holly boughs; no other sound but that of the water, and the slender notes of the redbreast" (146). Coleridge, Clare and other Romantics may have sometimes feared that books, writing and poetry had created literary commonplaces unthinkingly repeated by those unwilling or unable to listen for themselves. Yet the many patterns of allusion through which these writers echo and respond to each other point to how the dynamic interplay of listening, reading and writing may guide and train the ear to pick up on the sounds of a wintry place that might otherwise go unnoticed. As Wordsworth famously acknowledges in "The Sparrow's Nest", the gentle promptings of his sister guided his own attentiveness to the sights and sounds of nature: "she gave me eyes, she gave me ears" (Wordsworth, *Poems, in Two Volumes* line 17). Influenced themselves by the writing of others, Cowper and the Wordsworths did not listen simply to track or identify a bird by its sound, in the way that a bird-nesting boy or naturalist might do. They also reflected on the aesthetic quality of those sounds – as something of value in and of itself – and the thoughts and feelings they might produce in their human listeners. On our own wintry walk in the Lakes, we wanted to explore how and in what ways listening, reading and writing might guide the ear and develop environmental awareness.

We began by explaining that we would walk slowly and in silence together, warning that the experiment was likely to involve feelings of "strangeness and awkwardness", invoking Wordsworth's own prefatory words to *Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth and Coleridge 7). We read passages from Cowper, the Wordsworths and Clare, but there would be no guidance, no suggestion of any sounds that the group could or should specifically listen out for. No spoken direction which might disrupt the listening process, no harken to this – though we would, from time to time, pause and listen. We would not use the recording technologies now freely available and accessible on smart phones, though we would at the end gather in silence to write down a few comments on what each may have heard, though or felt. We were faced with a roomful of nervous smiles, with a few frowns too. Walking in silence did feel strange, as the group moved off like a silent herd. Nervous glances went round the group, while outsiders – holiday makers and walkers – looked on in baffled amusement. There was a feeling of tension, a desire to break the silence. But perhaps also a moment of relief for the shy and the withdrawn. Academics gathered to meet old friends and share ideas showed signs of frustration, while others embraced the momentary break from the pressure to speak, meet and impress at conference.

As we walked along the path by Dove Cottage, we heard jackdaws by the feeders. And water draining down the paths in a continual stream, in ways that made locals look nervous. We walked towards Ladywood, with robins piping up along the paths – tutting at our approach. A blackbird lost his nerve and went flying up into the trees with a hysterical cry. There were many continuities, sounds that the Wordsworths heard and recorded in their writings. But there were also gaps, sounds that would have been unfamiliar to them and probably unwelcome. Mostly we heard the sounds of our own rain jackets and waterproof trousers, swish-swishing against each other with a rhythm that faded in and out of the attention. We stopped to listen as we moved further up the path towards Ladywood, when a workman broke the silence with a profanity – to the great amusement of our silent smiling group. The silence brought out a kind of ancient gestural language of smiles, raised eyebrows and wide eyes. It also brought out the sounds of other things, the crack of a branch, the sounds of rain falling on stone, moss and leaves. The branches of the trees seemed to reach out, almost to speak. Higher up, it was quieter still. We heard the distant sounds of cars on the road, the steady hum of human traffic below. The cars looked small, but the sound rushed by below continually like waves on a shore. It began to interact with the view, to disturb or aggravate the stillness of the scene. It began to confuse the words and images of the Romantics, to conjure up strange analogies between roads and seas.

When we asked participants to take down a few notes about their experience, they recalled "A mix of humanity and nature. Footsteps of many shoes. Breathing, rustling of coats, sometimes giggles, cursing. Twigs snapping. Gutters and birds. Raindrops on moss. Drone note of traffic" (Castell and Mackenney). They heard not only rain, but "the variety of rain falling on different surfaces: stone, muddy puddles. The pattering of rain on my hood." One noticed how "the rain amplified and deadened other sounds" – drowning out some, drawing out others. For some, the act of listening took them out of themselves as their attention shifted to the world around them. One felt "hyperaware of everything around me". Another that the "focus shifted outside of myself". Another began to feel they "belonged in the landscape". For others, the experience turned their attention inward. They felt more conscious of and "uncomfortable with the sounds of my own thoughts", the unceasing stream of everyday worries. One thought "Much too much... How my children are doing at school... what I will do next week back at work...". Another found themselves

distracted by "hunger, my full bladder". Others shifted in and out of focus or attention, into different kinds of consciousness or awareness. "Dazed, reverent". The strangeness led one to feel compelled to walk this way more often, to reflect on old unthinking habits: "I should do more silent walks (no podcasts, music etc.)".

As a group of Romanticsists, many of course found themselves thinking about the Wordsworths. They thought of poems and passages, of how their own experience might compare with the siblings' many walks in the area. Poems and lines of poems sprung to mind as we walked and listened. One wondered "if William and Dorothy had heard the same birds, how much the sounds would've changed over the years". Another reflected on "how varied the sights were, how necessary to be obsessed by Nature". The steady drone of cars passing on the roads below was the most pronounced difference for most. One felt "the Romantics were pretty justified in bemoaning modernity", another "that there should be parts of the world where cars are illegal". Another became more conscious of this familiar soundtrack of the modern world. They heard the same sounds, but differently. They noted "how odd cars sound and loud". Feelings of strangeness, awkwardness or discomfort were mixed in with others. Members of the group felt "Contemplative, awake, peaceful". One felt "a childish delight in squelching boots". Many became more aware of the relationship of the individual to the group, the solitariness as well as the sense of community so apparent in the writings of the Wordsworths. Silently listening together created a feeling of being "alone among others".

Above all, the experience drew attention to the complexities of attempting to listen with the Romantics today, as the old familiar notes of blackbirds, robins and rain are mixed in with the sounds of modernity in surprising and defamiliarizing ways. Some things sounded the same, others sounded very different, and each member of the group listened in their own individual way, shaped by their own experiences and reading. For all of the many changes since the Romantics were writing, the words jotted down by those joining us in this experiment read with some of the freedom, attentiveness and inward reflection of Dorothy's journals or Clare's poetry and prose, even if participants often also lamented the fact that they were less practiced in the art of listening than the Romantics and wished that they might find more opportunities to hone their skills. The observations of the participants reflected the variety that we have already explored both in how the Romantics listened and in how we continue to listen with them. Listening actively and then writing down these thoughts and reflections offers a glimpse, albeit in a limited and experimental fashion, into how repeated acts of listening, reading and writing might foster something of the sensibility and proto-environmental awareness that the Romantics developed and sought to nurture. Listening with the Romantics requires us to hear not only their complexity, but also the complexity of our own response to them.

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