

## SEARCHING FOR SOUNDS IN U.S. LITERATURE: A MULTISENSORIAL, MULTIDISCIPLINARY PROJECT

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### Abstract

The aim of this essay is to provide a contribution to soundscape studies from the standpoint of U.S. literature and from a multi-disciplinary approach. The six case studies here included are the result of a project carried out by two groups of upper graduate students and myself during the academic years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 at the Department of International Studies of the University of Urbino, Italy.<sup>1</sup> We examined a selection of literary texts (from the 17<sup>th</sup> through the 189<sup>th</sup> century), searching for sounds, noises, silence, talk, conversation, bird songs, whistles, rattles, thunders, etc. with the aim of re-mapping the literary canon from an aural perspective. Given such an ambitious aim, we first had to study the ABC of acoustics, then practise the sound lexicon, and finally match our practical knowledge to the words we found on the written – and seemingly dumb – pages of our books. By reading aloud, both individually and in class, and by discussing our sensations, perceptions, and reactions to the soundscapes we encountered, we slowly discovered a universe which was full of sound and meanings. To this universe we applied the notions we had learnt from scholarly books, relying on the classification of sounds into categories (natural sounds or geophonies, sounds of life or biophonies, human-induced sounds or anthrophonies; see Schafer, Krause), the notions of low-fi and hi-fi soundscape (Schafer), the vibratory nature of sound (Di Benedetto), the findings of auditory neurosciences (Schnupp et al.), auditory spatial awareness (Blessner & Salter), and the concepts of acoustic territorialization, audible identity, and sonic body (Labelle). This essay is also a homage to electronic musician and soundscape pioneer Bernard L. Krause, b. 1938, who in 1968 founded *Wild Sanctuary*, an organization dedicated to the recording and archiving of natural soundscapes ([www.wildsanctuary.com](http://www.wildsanctuary.com)). He was the first to incorporate natural soundscapes as an integral component of orchestration, and in 2007 he demonstrated that it is possible to listen to soundscapes from all over the world and to create archives.

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**Keywords:** Sound, noise, soundscape, literature, United States

### Introduction

The aims of my project are twofold: on the one hand, I intend to open up the traditionally “visual” realm of literature to the instruments of sound-based research so that sight ceases to be perceived as dominant; in particular, for students of Anglo-American literature, this means:

- 1- Tracing the sounds of the United States as they have been represented in literature;
- 2- Reconsidering realism, symbolism, postmodernism, etc. from the point of view of sound;

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<sup>1</sup> Among the students who participated in the project, a major contribution was given by the following: Luca Ambrogiani, Sara Carloni, Federica Crescentini, Massimiliano Greghini, Alessio Iodice, Francesca Secci, and Kevin Duan Simmonds.

- 3- Providing a data base of sounds for further study, with a particular focus on sound-witness but also including sounds of imagination;
- 4- Remapping Anglo-American literature by giving due attention to texts which appear particularly interesting from the perspective of soundscape studies;
- 5- Increasing the knowledge of acoustic history. In fact, literature – especially prior to the invention of the phonograph, radio, cinema, etc. – recorded and / or imagined an extraordinary amount of sounds which are precious for maintaining the memory of our own civilization and of technological progress with all its pros and cons.

On the other hand, I strongly advocate the inclusion of literature among the disciplines already involved in the study of sound, alongside acoustics, ecology, neurosciences, etc. In other words, I demand a place for literature, text analysis, and criticism within the arena of soundscape studies.

In the first year of my project I decided to choose a small, random amount of texts and started analyzing them, both individually and collectively. We chose some samples from poetry and some others from novels, some from the older times and some from modern production, without overlooking minorities, gender, and popular literature. We found the software “Antcom” of great help, and we also relied on the precious contribution of two particularly knowledgeable PhD students, bilingual Eduardo Fichera, who delivered a lesson on the specific lexicon related to sound, and young film director Andrea Laquidara, who gave two lessons on sound in the cinema. In the second year of activity we focused on the colonial times, up to the Declaration of Independence (1776). Given the great interest shown by my students, some of whom have offered to continue their collaboration even after the exam, it is my intention to pursue my research and team work over the coming years, also creating a website and publishing articles.

## I.

In the late 1960s, R. Murray Schafer started the interdisciplinary World Soundscape Project at the Communications Centre of the Simon Fraser University, which addressed scholars from various disciplines. Nowadays soundscape studies include not only ecology and acoustics (since Schafer 1977) but also philosophy, architecture, sociology, and – hopefully – humanities. If, on the one hand, scholars are interested in ameliorating the acoustic environment (studies on acoustic pollution, noise, etc.), on the other soundscape studies are opening themselves up to the study of continuities and changes in acoustic environments in the course of time, and this obviously includes literature as the most powerful reservoir of sounds from the past (Schweighauser, B). True, a few pioneering articles appeared on literary soundscape as early as the late Eighties, such as “‘The Noisiest Novel Ever Written’: The Soundscape of Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*”, to give just one example, but the true input and direction was actually supplied by the invitation to a “consilience” between humanities and natural sciences, formulated by American biologist Edward Osborne Wilson at the end of the Nineties (1998). The subsequent diffusion of multi-disciplinary studies and the emergence of environmental studies have gradually created the right conditions for revisiting the literary landscape from new critical perspectives which may broaden, or change, its boundaries. Eco-criticism in particular has compelled scholars to reconsider nature and urban milieu, analyzing them not as mere backgrounds but as actors, that is as bearers of contents and meaningful connotations. In the wake of these studies, literary soundscapes have proved and are proving to be a fertile terrain of inquiry and research.

The motivation for bringing this kind of research into a university classroom was based firstly on the obvious importance that sound, music and noise have for today's youth, and secondly on the fact that text analysis has traditionally privileged sight rather than sound.

It is a fact that we do not have any aural equivalents for expressions like “imaginary”, “visualize”, “imagine”, “vision”, or “contemplate”. And yet, as Schafer remarked (Schafer: 11), we human beings do not have *earlids*, which exposes us to far a greater amount of sounds than images, since we cannot close our ears at will.

While it may seem difficult to “imagine” or “visualize” with our ears, it is certainly possible to think of a sound. Well, it is curious that we do not have a verb in the English or American language to define this “acoustic imagination”, an expression which is used by scholars but is an obvious oxymoron. Nevertheless, many terms have been created over the last years by scholars in other disciplinary areas, and literary criticism has already started to adopt them – e.g. *soundmark*, *low-fi vs hi-fi soundscape*, *acoustic profile*, *audiograph*, etc. This makes us realize that literature must necessarily interact with other disciplines, within and without humanities, including acoustics, ecology, and neurosciences, if it intends to adopt the soundscape as an area of research. Without a truly multi-disciplinary perspective, it is in fact impossible to apply the notion of soundscape to literature, text analysis, and criticism.

I am now going to give a few examples of our work, starting with early America and ending with contemporary fiction. Of course each case study would merit many more pages and deserve much more attention and analysis, but since this is intended as a work in progress and a guideline to be shared for further research, I hope the reader will bear with me and accept this justification for the apparent haste.

Anglo-American literature has been a precious reservoir for sounds right from its origins. The colonial times offer many examples of the importance of sound in early America, both for the natives and for the newcomers. Among the former, geophonies and biophonies prevail and also take on a series of meanings: the sound of the wind, or of the water, belong to the same universe as man, in a circle where all things are connected, so the experience of hearing is a fully existential, holistic one. The dimension of story-telling in so-called oral culture adds an extra, particularly powerful quality to sounds, noises, and voices, so that all senses are entangled in the experiences of life, memory, and human relationships. Moreover, since birds and other animals are perceived as brothers to human beings, and shamans are connected to the world of the spirits, all sounds may therefore belong to different dimensions of being, which considerably complicates the soundscape we find in native literature – when written. Likewise, the soundscape of plantations was also very important, since it contributed to the creation of a communal Afro-American consciousness and in many cases functioned as a means of social resistance.

#### Case study – 1

Among the white colonists, too, even though in a different way, sounds played an important role, especially natural nonverbal sounds such as thunder which, though belonging to a sort of recognizable sonic cosmic order, could easily be bent into symbolic or allegorical meanings. Even though instrumental sounds were important, such as bells, which were often used to constitute community (Rath 3), thunder and other natural sounds were more significant and encouraged a range of interpretations. Anne Bradstreet, the first well-known poet of the colonial age, and probably the first woman writer of the new country, well embodies this. Her poem “Some Verses Upon the Burning of our House”, written in 1666, has a great focus on sound since the female protagonist is woken up in the middle of the night by a powerful noise and by people shouting that the house is on fire. Her heart calls out for God to help her and give her strength to face the danger. This is the opening of the poem:

In silent night when rest I took,  
For sorrow near I did not look,  
I wakened was with thundering noise  
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.

That fearful sound of "Fire" and "Fire,"  
 Let no man know, is my desire. [...] <sup>2</sup>

All of these sounds – thund’ring noise, shrieks, dreadful voice, fearful sound – are very strong. They belong to different domains – geophonies, biophonies. There is no calm after the initial silence, when the poet was sleeping. It is God’s wrath passing judgment onto men that creates such frightening noises. The judgment is not visual, but aural. As the poem goes on, Bradstreet continues by saying that it was God’s will and that the Almighty took only futile and superfluous things from her, and that a much more beautiful and richer house is waiting for her in Heaven. When the poet talks about things made by man she uses very negative adjectives, whereas God’s works are described with positive adjectives. This is clearly a Puritan point of view: Bradstreet is grateful to God because He made her realize the futility of what she had. As a Puritan, she does not have to accumulate all that wealth, because it is nothing compared to what man can hope to gain in God’s Kingdom.

Another puritan poet, Michael Wigglesworth, in his *The Day of Doom* depicts the pain suffered by the damned people with auditory verbs, such as *to cry*, *to roar* and *to yell*. Even though we do have verbs referred to sight (*behold*) the soundscape is overwhelming. What is interesting is the focus on the body: the horror and terror of Hell is evoked through body sounds which communicate desperation, suffering, and eternal damnation:

Oh, *fearful Doom!* now there's no room  
 for hope or help at all:  
 Sentence is past which aye shall last,  
 Christ will not it recall.  
 There might you hear them rent and tear  
 the Air with their out-cries:  
 The hideous noise of their sad voice  
 ascendeth to the Skies. (stanza 205)  
 They wring their hands, their caitiff-hands  
 and gnash their teeth for terrour;  
 They cry, they roar for anguish sore,  
 and gnaw their tongues for horreur.  
 But get away without delay,  
 Christ pitties not your cry:  
 Depart to Hell, there may you yell,  
 and roar Eternally. (206)

Only later in the poem, when Good prevails over Sin, can we hear more pleasant sounds (hymns) but still the soundscape prevails over sight:

The Saints behold with courage bold,  
 and thankful wonderment,  
 To see all those that were their foes  
 thus sent to punishment:  
 Then do they sing unto their King  
 a Song of endless Praise:  
 They praise his Name, and do proclaim  
 that just are all his ways. (220)  
 Thus with great joy and melody  
 to Heav'n they all ascent,  
 Him there to praise with sweetest layes,  
 and Hymns that never end,

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Verses\\_upon\\_the\\_Burning\\_of\\_our\\_House,\\_July\\_18th,\\_1666](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Verses_upon_the_Burning_of_our_House,_July_18th,_1666) (14/05/2014)

Where with long Rest they shall be blest,  
and nought shall them annoy:  
Where they shall see as seen they be,  
and whom they love enjoy. (221)<sup>3</sup>

#### Case study – 2

A very different use of sounds is to be found, almost two centuries later, in Edgar Allan Poe's literary production. In many of his tales he describes reality through a wide repertory of images and sounds with the purpose of creating suspense. He wants to shock the readers, to horrify them; religion has somehow lost its importance. In such stories as "The Black Cat" (1843) or "The Tell Tale Heart" (1843) the aural dimension is predominant over sight, yet sounds have not allegorical meanings but are used to create an uncanny atmosphere.

*The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839)<sup>4</sup>, for example, is set in the country and is a variation on the gothic theme of the haunted house. It goes without saying that visual elements are predominant, at least in the initial part. As a matter of fact, the reader is provided with a detailed description of the humanized house, which is crumbling to pieces. The strong sense of decay, of gloom, and presence of death is, however, matched by a subtext clearly linked to the protagonist's perception of the soundscape. One of the first things to note is that the author explicitly focuses on the absence of sound: "a dull, dark, and soundless day" and silence of course belongs to the realm of soundscape.

Though the overwhelming majority of adjectives are linked to sight and concur in conveying a sense of gloom, sounds slowly intervene and contribute in creating the atmosphere: hard sounds and occlusive consonants, for instance – *d* and *t*, – are useful to this extent. Poe makes a large use of alliteration, choosing many occlusive and hard sounds because he wants to convey negative feelings (desperation, desolation, etc.). He often uses repetitions to create a much more detailed scene, and makes it vivid as if through a *camera-eye*. The sense of music and rhythm as well make the reader feel imprisoned in the language. The syntax is very complex too.

The story begins on a "soundless day" and this absence of sound is so marked that the reader *does actually miss* the presence of sound. Silence is disquieting, almost artificial, unnatural, almost inhuman. After a few pages, "rattle", the first word in the story that has to do with sonority, appears along with other words and descriptions connected to sounds. For example, the author makes a complex and careful analysis of Roderick's timber of voice. It is interesting to this purpose that Roderick Usher, the house owner, suffers from a mental disorder which is defined as "a morbid acuteness of the senses".

The third important element comes from the human voice, a guttural utterance described in detail. The house can be described as a Hi-Fi soundscape since every single sound is heard distinctly and loudly. Almost every sound inspires the protagonist with horror, except for the fourth element, which is music. He likes lute music, but dislikes the guitar solos which pierce the silence from time to time. Quite interestingly, there is a juxtaposition of music and human voice (the "speaking guitar").

In this context, even the beating of a heart (a sound of the body) is perceived as "horrible". In the house there lives a young lady (Roderick's twin sister) who is very ill and, quite expectedly, dies. Roderick's peculiar decision to keep her body inside the building for many days blurs the boundaries between life and death and eliminates all noise except low and indefinite sounds which come from somewhere unknown. Only when the tempest finally makes its entrance do we get rid of silence.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.puritansermons.com/poetry/doom201.htm> (13/05/2014)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.poemuseum.org/works-fall.php> (25/05/2014)

Sight doesn't help us see the moon or the stars; what we do see is some kind of strange gases – apparently mere electrical phenomena not to be bothered with. But at a certain point, when the narrator starts reading a story, we meet with a tale within the tale and encounter sounds coming from *that* story. There is a juxtaposition of sounds (coming from the book which is being read and from the house itself). The two realities collapse. Furthermore, the scene involving the apparition of Madeline's ghost (Roderick's sister) is introduced by sonorous elements. In fact, the narrator is able to easily hear the ghost's steps along with her heart beating (an imaginary sound, of course) even if she is behind the door.

Symbolically, the story starts and ends with *silence*.

Incipit: During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year,

End: --there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters--and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher".

Now that we have come to the end of the story, we have to go back to its beginning, since we cannot ignore the fact that before the incipit there is an epigraph in French, which reads: "Son coeur est un luth suspendu/ Sitôt qu'on le touche il résonne" (in a following edition the original *son*, his/her, was changed to *mon*, my).

The author is Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857), a French poet and songwriter. We might ask ourselves why Poe chose to give an epigraph to his short story and in particular why he chose the words of de Béranger. According to Gérard Genette (1987) there are four reasons to quote an epigraph: as a comment on the title, as a comment on the text, for the importance of the epigraph's author, for the "epigraph effect", which means to stress the author's culture. Of all these possibilities the second one seems the most credible. The epigraph is a key to unlocking the mystery of the story.

When we read the text, the first impression is that the epigraph has nothing to do with the short story: one of the first words is "soundless", while the epigraph is a metaphor that compares a heart with a lute, so it introduces the idea of music. If we go through the text we find the word "lute" just once, in the poem *The Haunted Palace* ("To a lute's well-tuned law"). On the contrary, the word "heart", the other element of the metaphor, occurs as many as five times: twice referring to the narrator's heart ("a sickening of the heart"; "my very heart"), once to Usher ("it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request"), once to Ethelred ("who was by nature of a doughty heart"), and once to Lady Madeline ("heavy and horrible beating of her heart"). Since the epigraph states "son coeur" ("his/her heart"), we could say that we can exclude the narrator. And according to logics we could exclude also Ethelred, because he is the character of a story read by the narrator. So is it Lady Madeline's or Usher's heart? The ambiguity is strengthened by the fact that in French we can't understand the possessor's sex through the possessive adjective.

This epigraph could be an anticipation of the second half of the story. In a certain sense the narrator evokes Lady Madeline's spirit by reading a book: he "touches" her heart and she makes noises. It could be also a reference to Usher's illness, because he can bear just sounds from stringed instruments, like the lute. Or it is there to remind us that, despite the silence of the beginning, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a story of sounds, made of sounds, and that is the heart of the story that is ready to ring as soon as we read it?

We have demonstrated here that the House does not represent a mere landscape but also a very rich and evocative soundscape. As in the following short stories "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), sound is not simply background but is fundamental to the story and to the development of the plot. In *The Tell-Tale Heart* the importance of sounds is made explicit from the very beginning. The first person narrator says he suffers from a disease that has sharpened his senses (as with Roderick Usher), above all that of hearing. But also his sight is impaired, since he feels an inexplicable repulsion for the old man he lives with on the

simple basis of his “blue eye”, also described as a “vulture eye”. Killing him would mean getting rid of his scrutinizing eye, which, according to the narrator, controls his conscience. So he decides to kill the man during the night. The dark setting implies the absence of images of any type: words connected to sounds are, on the contrary, very meaningful since they emphasize the scary atmosphere and the victim’s fear (“Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror”<sup>5</sup>, etc.)

After killing the old man, dismembering his body, and hiding its pieces under the floorboards, the protagonist feels certain that he has concealed the signs of his guilt in the best possible way. Obviously, he does not imagine that an auditory hallucination, rather than a visual detail, will betray his guilt. In fact, when the policemen enter the room where the body is concealed, he begins to hear a loud noise – the old man’s beating heart. It becomes so loud – even though the policemen do not hear it – that the narrator is compelled to admit his crime.

In “The Black Cat” too we have a domestic crime, even though the story is more complicated. A man, an alcoholic, has killed his own cat in a rage fit, out of pure perversion. Then a second cat arrives at his house, and is welcomed at first, but grows unbearable to the man, since it reminds him of his previous victim. So he decides to kill it as well, but his wife intervenes and the man kills her in its place. After the murder, the man walls his wife up in the cellar. The cat has mysteriously disappeared. After a while the police come to inspect the house, and the voice of the cat – which was walled up alive – reveals his owner’s murder. Here, too, it is sound (in this case, an animal sound) that allows the truth to come to light. Be it a sound of the human body (heartbeat) or a cat’s voice, sound betrays the bad conscience of man. No body of evidence, no confessions, and no eyewitnesses are necessary: sound will out.

#### Case study – 3

On a totally different standpoint we find “A Parody” from *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Slavery was still legal at the time when this work was written and sounds are quite expectedly linked to the oppression of the body and mind. It is worth noting that the Afro-Americans were traditionally linked to music and rhythm from their tribal origins and that music (through the spiritual and the blues) offered them consolation and a way of resistance. The importance of hearing and telling is remarked in the poem from the very beginning, where we find the verbs “hear”, “tell” and “sing”: hear in connection with the reader (“hear me”), tell in connection with the narrator (“hear me tell”) and sing in connection with the white man’s hypocrisy (“sing of heavenly union”):

Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell  
How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,  
And women buy and children sell,  
And preach all sinners down to hell,  
And sing of heavenly union.<sup>6</sup>

On the contrary, black people are deprived of the possibility to speak, even to utter any kind of sound: “Then seize their negroes by their throats / And choke, for heavenly union”. The poet asks himself (and the reader) how it can be possible that the white people “loudly talk of Christ’s reward”, “sing a sacred song”, “make a prayer both loud and long” and at the same time “roar, and scold, and whip, and sting”, “preach and roar”.

Douglass was a social activist and one of the most important Afro-American writers, having directly experienced slavery. He is well-known not only for his autobiography but for his struggle for civil rights and racial equality. In this poem, Douglass is parodying

<sup>5</sup> <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/poe/telltale.html> (14/05/2014)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Frederick\\_Douglass/The\\_Narrative\\_of\\_the\\_Life\\_of\\_Frederick\\_Douglass/A\\_Parody\\_p1.html](http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Frederick_Douglass/The_Narrative_of_the_Life_of_Frederick_Douglass/A_Parody_p1.html) (16/05/2014)

*Heavenly Union*, a hymn sung in many southern churches at that time. He was famous for his sense of humour and ability to mimic the clergy despite the sufferings of his people.

In the specific case of this poem, its regular rhyming scheme makes it similar to a song or a poem, so we have a great sonority. This sonority does not reveal itself only in the structure but also in many single words or sentences which are linked to sound and therefore contribute in rendering the sense of violence and in evoking the inhuman conditions of the slaves.

#### Case study – 4

We find what is maybe the first powerfully conscious perception of an American soundscape in Henry David Thoreau, an important thinker and writer of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thoreau belongs to a group of philosophers who are known as Transcendentalists. They were strongly engaged in creating a national literature and believed in a personal relation between man and the energy of universe, with no mediation, be it Nature or God. Thoreau is the author of a chapter entitled “Sounds” (in *Walden*, 1854) where he recognizes the importance of this sense and also includes the sounds of modernity among the traditional sounds of the wilderness (i.e. the “savage” world previous to civilization). He seems to interpret very well what Krause, more than one century later, will call *biophony* or “creature choir” or “concerto of the natural world”<sup>7</sup>, but he also includes man and technology in his aural description.

The social relevance of hearing in *Walden* has recently been acknowledged by Laura Zebuhr, according to whom Thoreau’s work challenges a traditional model of relation based on identification with the “other self” (such as Echo in Narcissus’s myth) and advocates for relations with the “other” (Zebuhr 37). In other words, while Narcissus is prompted by the desire to know himself better, Thoreau does not look at himself in a mirror but looks at – and listens to – the others. This otherness is made explicit by the image of the train (a symbol of technology but also of communication, of people moving and travelling, etc.): Thoreau cannot see it as from his standpoint it is out of sight, but he can hear it. We quote some passages here, where we have underlined the parts of interest:

... while the birds sing around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time...

As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by two and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; ... I have heard the rattle of railroad cars, now dying away and then reviving like the beat of a partridge, conveying travellers from Boston to the country.

The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer’s yard, ...

I am refreshed and expanded when the freight train rattles past me, and I smell the stores which go dispensing their odors all the way ...

here comes the cattle-train ... The air is filled with the bleating of calves and sheep, and the hustling of oxen, as if a pastoral valley were going by.

Sometimes, on Sundays, I heard the bells,[...] All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre... It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood; the same trivial words and notes sung by a wood-nymph.

At evening, the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon ... I was not unpleasantly disappointed when it was prolonged into the cheap and natural music of the cow...

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<sup>7</sup> <<http://www.acousticecology.org/wildlandbiology.html>>, 31/08/2013).

Regularly at half-past seven, in one part of the summer, after the evening train had gone by, the whip-poor-wills chanted their vespers for half an hour, sitting on a stump by my door, or upon the ridge-pole of the house. They would begin to sing almost with as much precision as a clock, ... but often that singular buzzing sound like a fly in a spider`s web, only proportionally louder.

When other birds are still, the screech owls take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu. Their dismal scream is truly Ben Jonsonian. [...] Yet I love to hear their wailing, their doleful responses, trilled along the woodside; reminding me sometimes of music and singing birds; as if it were the dark and tearful side of music, the regrets and sighs that would fain be sung. [...]. Oh-o-o-o-o that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n! sighs one on this side of the pond, and circles with the restlessness of despair to some new perch on the gray oaks. Then -- that I never had been bor-r-r-r-n! echoes another on the farther side with tremulous sincerity, and -- bor-r-r-r-n! comes faintly from far in the Lincoln woods.

I was also serenaded by a hooting owl. Near at hand you could fancy it the most melancholy sound in Nature, as if she meant by this to stereotype and make permanent in her choir the dying moans of a human being -- some poor weak relic of mortality who has left hope behind, and howls like an animal, yet with human sobs, on entering the dark valley, made more awful by a certain gurgling melodiousness -- I find myself beginning with the letters gl when I try to imitate it [...]. It reminded me of ghouls and idiots and insane howlings. But now one answers from far woods in a strain made really melodious by distance -- Hoo hoo hoo, hooter hoo; and indeed for the most part it suggested only pleasing associations, whether heard by day or night, summer or winter.

Late in the evening I heard the distant rumbling of wagons over bridges -- a sound heard farther than almost any other at night -- the baying of dogs, and sometimes again the lowing of some disconsolate cow in a distant barn-yard. In the mean-while all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs, the sturdy spirits of ancient wine-bibbers and wassailers, still unrepentant, trying to sing [...] with the ejaculation tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r--oonk, tr-r-r-oonk! and [...], tr-r-r-oonk! and each in his turn repeats the same down to the least distended, leakiest, and flabbiest paunched, that there be no mistake; and then the howl goes round again and again, until the sun disperses the morning mist, and only the patriarch is not under the pond, but vainly bellowing troonk from time to time, and pausing for a reply.

I am not sure that I ever heard the sound of cock-crowing from my clearing, and I thought that it might be worth the while to keep a cockerel for his music merely, as a singing bird. The note of this once wild Indian pheasant is certainly the most remarkable of any bird`s, and if they could be naturalized without being domesticated, it would soon become the most famous sound in our woods, surpassing the clangor of the goose and the hooting of the owl; and then imagine the cackling of the hens to fill the pauses when their lords` clarions rested! ... To walk in a winter morning in a wood where these birds abounded, their native woods, and hear the wild cockerels crow on the trees, [...] This foreign bird`s note is celebrated by the poets of all countries along with the notes of their native songsters....<sup>8</sup>

The anthroponic sounds (bells, carriages, etc.) mix with biophonic sounds (birds, cows, etc.) in a multisensorial, all-American melting pot where sound and smell take over sight. More: sound encourages the perception of time flowing, memories, consciousness, and even prompts spiritual growth and shared citizenship. The use of onomatopaea also encourages reading aloud, which suggests the possibility of an audience.

Through his writing, Thoreau invites the reader to develop their perceptiveness and shows his own pleasure in listening to the sounds (both biophonies and anthrophonies) that surround the cabin where he is temporarily living: church bells ringing, carriages rattling and

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<sup>8</sup> <http://thoreau.eserver.org/walden04.html> (20/05/2014)

rumbling, cows lowing, whip-poor-wills singing, owls hooting, frogs croaking, and cockerels crowing. The most remarkable presence in this soundscape is, however, that of the train, which creates a visible and audible bridge between nature and technology, the past and the present. Here the author wishes to convey a sense of optimism and belief in the future of the country. Listening to sound becomes a form of knowledge, personal growth, and progress.

Case study – 5

Through me many long dumb voices,  
Voices of the interminable generation of slaves,  
Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,  
Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,  
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,  
And of the threads that connect the stars – and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,  
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,  
Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,  
Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.  
Through me forbidden voices,  
Voices of sexes and lusts...voices veiled, and I remove the veil,  
Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigured.<sup>9</sup>

These lines belong to the poem “Song of Myself” by Walt Whitman (in *Leaves of Grass*, 1860). It is a very long poem where almost every aspect of America is celebrated. Whitman was well aware of his civilian mission as a poet and of the power of poetry. In particular in these lines Whitman states that he can give voice to people who normally have no voice in American society: slaves, prostitutes, deformed persons. Even things and animals can sing through the voice of the poet, thanks to humanization. These lines represent an extraordinary way to express the social and political role of poetry in forming a national conscience.

All of Whitman’s poetry is linked to sound and music. In “Song of Myself” the poet often invites the reader *to listen* (“You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self”) while in “I Hear America Singing” (in *Leaves of Grass*, 1860), he reunites all categories of workers in a huge concerto of *singers*.

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe and strong,  
The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
The mason singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand  
singing on the steamboat deck,  
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
The wood-cutter’s song, the ploughboy’s on his way in the morning,  
or at noon intermission or at sundown,  
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work,  
or of the girl sewing or washing,  
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
The day what belongs to the day--at night the party of young  
fellows, robust, friendly,  
Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.<sup>10</sup>

The poet is interested in every part of his great country and in every detail of the landscape. The sea, the rivers, the mountains, the cities, all of them appear not only to the

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15755>>

<sup>10</sup> <[http://allpoetry.com/poem/8451701-I\\_Hear\\_America\\_Singing-by-Walt\\_Whitman](http://allpoetry.com/poem/8451701-I_Hear_America_Singing-by-Walt_Whitman)>

eyes but to the ear as well. Here the poet concentrates on voices because he wants to give voice to dispossessed people, but through the repetition of the word “singing” he creates an atmosphere of crossing echoes, a sort of modern Babel which is very modern and anticipates some important innovative stylistic modes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (think, for instance, of Dos Passos, Faulkner, and even the film *Der Himmel über Berlin* by Wim Wenders). Undoubtedly, voice is a recurring term in poetry and narrative and an important soundmark in literary soundscape studies. We find a growing number of voices as Americans feel increasingly free to have their voice heard

Case study – 6

Emily Dickinson was arguably the greatest American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century together with Walt Whitman. Though living in isolation for the great part of her life, she was one of the most brilliant minds of her age. Her poems were all published posthumously from 1890 onward. We chose to concentrate on poem 465, also known as “I heard a fly buzz when I died” from its first verse. This verse is particularly intriguing, being based on an obviously ambiguous and oxymoronic statement involving not only the sense of hearing, but the true essence of life and death.

If a person *died*, how could s/he be writing about his or her experience? The fact that Dickinson describes her death while she is still alive raises questions which we cannot answer. What we can do, though, is analyse the context. And we shall observe that sound dominates the scene: the sudden sound of a fly, monotonous and irregular, “blue, uncertain, stumbling”, creates a moment of suspension between life and death, maybe the announcement of a symbolic new birth, or vice versa an abrupt return to life at the very last moment before expiring.

In our opinion, the *buzz* is more important than the *fly*. The fly has often been associated with bodily corruption and decay, but what interests us is the buzz as a sound. The last line, “I could not see to see”, has also been widely discussed by critics, but from a soundscape perspective it clearly means that sight is unfit for “seeing” in the sense of “understanding”. It appears to us that the first *see* is referred to sight, while the second one is referred to comprehension. In this way, sight fails to give the dying person assistance and what remains is sound. The key to the mystery of existence, therefore, ought to be found not in light, nor in the expectation of a powerful king, but in a simple, ephemeral buzz.

I heard a fly buzz when I died;  
 The stillness round my form  
 Was like the stillness in the air  
 Between the heavens of storm.  
 The eyes beside had wrung them dry,  
 And breaths were gathering sure  
 For that last onset, when the king  
 Be witnessed in his power.  
 I willed my keepsakes, signed away  
 What portion of me I  
 Could make assignable,-and then  
 There interposed a fly,  
 With blue, uncertain, stumbling buzz,  
 Between the light and me;  
 And then the windows failed, and then  
 I could not see to see.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15393> (07/05/2014)

## Conclusion

My students and I have traced just a very narrow and incomplete path in this essay, but my aim is essentially to arouse interest so that this branch of studies will be given the right consideration in the near future. Next year we shall start exploring the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in the meanwhile I am fully persuaded that no innovation is possible exclusively within a single discipline, therefore in the same way as I welcome suggestions and contributions from all fields of research, I hope sciences other than literature will reach out and engender a fruitful domain of reciprocal reinforcement and exchange.

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