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Abstract

This thesis represents live and on-going research into the recent literary movement that has been termed ‘the new nature writing’. A focus within this movement has arisen which employs particular alertness to aural soundscapes in wild nature. This focus, which for the purposes of the thesis I am limiting to the British Isles, appears to be an increasing attempt to harness the human ear and employ it as a tool for ‘seismic’ effect. The method used, which I have termed ecoseismology, works at the intersection of the sensory and the literary; by using deep listening to external soundscapes it aims to achieve an integrative, internal effect through rendering of experience. Ecoseismology is a response to an intense period of ecological and environmental uncertainty. It is guided by immersive observation, often forensic in its closely-heard detail, where ecological particularities and sonorous dimensions of the natural world are sensed and rendered. Ecoseismology sensitises the listener and the reader in order to achieve shifts in scale where awareness moves from the particular, close-up, ‘heard’ and ‘felt’ experience towards thinking about more ecosensitive ways of living on the planet. To locate the spectrum of experience and output encompassed by ecoseismology the thesis exposes its three stages. By applying these stages to nature writings of the last ten years, texts that use or fit the ecoseismic method are identified. At the heart of these stages is the ecoseismic moment: a re-imagining of crisis provoking thought about the wider ecosystem which is intended to be a catalyst for change. The two ‘classic’ otter books which inspired the creative part of the submission, Otter Country, In Search of the Wild Otter, (shortened to Otter Country from here), are measured against ecoseismology. Then Otter Country’s own ecoseismic structure, which entails a quest for increased understanding of an elusive wild mammal, is measured. Alongside the sensory aspects of close encounter in this new otter narrative, issues of wider ecology are triggered, but didactic solutions are not directly sought. Thoughts provoked by this last aspect of Otter Country provide directions for further research: is it more effective to make readers feel, or to urge them to act? How is this movement within the new nature writing spreading to other genres and media, and what forms will it take, what effects will it have?
Introduction

Ecosismology – a rationale and definition

This thesis investigates a rising search for the disappearing soundscapes and ecologies of the land. The soundscape of our home was part of where we grew as a human species. The company of voices we now find missing or drowned out, which once honed our ancestors’ senses, are being sought out by a group of writers. Amidst the resurgence of nature writing of the last ten years this group of writers have taken a particular approach which – like the science of measuring shock waves in the earth’s crust – uses acutely sensitive tools of detection. In this case the human ear is being used to attune to place and to community. The attunement goes beyond surfaces perceived by the eye and employs other senses to alert instinct, memory, and emotional reverberation in the natural world. The thesis springs from the idea that visual ways of perceiving wild nature, often influenced by the idealised and picturesque images so popular in today’s bright-screen, high resolution culture, may not be sufficient to draw attention to ecological detail or provoke the change that is needed during a time of environmental crisis. Faced with clichéd views of the natural world, a counter-culture of perception is emerging, listening to and depicting soundscape which is alert and self-aware. It relies on aural experience which is inherently proximal and can evoke instinctive, close attention and powerful physical and emotional reactions. The deep, primitive origins of this sense as a tool of survival, where human ancestors relied on sound and hearing as a clue to impending threat or danger remains embedded in our bodily responses. Hearing still provokes deep reactions and ecosismology exploits this to engender a widening of the imagination to encompass the scale of a new sort crisis: now it is not the fact that wolves might be prowling that is the problem, but that there are no wolves, and their loss is connected to a wider ecological catastrophe. In the ecoseismic moment we realise we are now left with what John Burnside in his poem ‘The Light Trap’ has aptly
named a ‘homesickness’ for animals. Ecopeismic writing is a response to that homesickness, or grief, about the impoverished ecological state from which we may not be able to escape unless we ‘come to our senses’.

Ecoseismology engages the ear to attune to wild nature and to deeper sympathy with it. With knowledge of the landscape’s losses, as well as an understanding of ecology and evolution that our ancestors lacked, listening to the natural soundscapes that are left can lead us into moments of clarity and shock. Stages of this kind of literary ‘deep listening’ are being taken up by writers increasingly, and publishers in the mainstream are responding by asking for more, thus gradually widening and deepening the field. Poets like Kathleen Jamie, Gillian Clarke and Alice Oswald may be amongst the originators of this wave of ecologically alert nature-listening in their poetry and essays, but the listening appears to be spreading outward into the literary output of prose writers such as Mark Cocker, Paul Evans, Tim Dee and others who make up the disparate band of writers writing the ‘new nature’. The common methods of some these writings which appear to be particularly sensitive to sound and sonority will be discussed later, and thought lines will reach into the wider media.

Could it be that a kind of ‘sympathetic resonance’, a term from music which transferred to poetry, to prose writing and beyond, expresses how sonority in the natural world is reverberating within and influencing the attentions of this new literary output? Could it be that a desire for new ways of perceiving and relating to the wild environment have given rise amongst some of these writers to a desire for greater sensitivity, to ecocentric listening, to hearing more clearly what the environment is telling us? These writers do not explicitly ask if we have forgotten to how listen; cocooned in our insulated houses, ears plugged with i-pods, eyes replete with dazzling images, the knowledge of muffled forgetfulness is an implicit undercurrent in their work. Ecopeismic writing forms a kind of alert to encourage deep listening where the senses form a pathway back to ourselves.

Exquisite listening, like deep listening, is a therapeutic term for intense, revelatory conversation between human and human; when applied to encounter with the beyond-human it has implications about the way we can become alert within our home-place to community and more ecocentric in our output. Alerted to the details in the land, its fragility and its ecological losses, we can shift from complacency into the ecopeismic
moment, as when John Burnside suddenly expresses his fears when out beachcombing with his son, in his poem ‘History’:

Sometimes I am dizzy with the fear of losing everything – the sea, the sky, all living creatures, forests, estuaries: we trade so much to know the virtual we scarcely register the drift and tug of other bodies

(*The Light Trap*, 41)

In his 2003 essay on climate change denial, ‘With Eyes Wide Shut’, George Monbiot has expressed a similar concern about the disrupted relation we have with the natural world. The complacency which he feels makes any enlightened action for the environment impossible is identified here:

We live in a dream world. With a small, rational part of the brain, we recognise that our existence is governed by material realities, and that, as those realities change, so will our lives. But underlying this awareness is the deep semi-consciousness that absorbs the moment in which we live, then generalises it, projecting our future lives as repeated instances of the present. This, not the superficial world of our reason, is our true reality. All that separates us from the indigenous people of Australia is that they recognise this and we do not. Our dreaming will, as it has begun to do already, destroy the conditions necessary for human life on Earth. (2003)

Ecoseismology aims to puncture the ‘deep semi-consciousness’ that Monbiot gloomily describes as so destructive and hopeless, and that Burnside fears. In his poetry Burnside reacts to the issue by sensory involvement, by naming and honouring the varied textures of the community of animals and plants around him. In ‘History’ from *The Light Trap*
he raises the question: ‘how to be alive/ in all this gazed-upon and cherished world/ and do no harm’. (42). Responding to the challenge of the muffled complacency of our lives, in reaction to the seductive dream of television’s ‘Natural Worlds’, and ‘Frozen Planets’, ecoseismology attempts to intensify on-the-ground ‘listening’ to what is left of wild nature, to draw attention to it and thereby to save it. Alice Oswald suggests that listening to soundscape is a conduit to a ‘more many sided way of knowing place than looking.’ (The Thunder Mutters, 101 Poems for the Planet, ix). In an essay introducing this 2005 anthology, Oswald subtly bemoans the listening-disconnect between human and place by using a horticultural metaphor. She gives an example of a particularly deafening technology: the leaf-blower. Oswald reveals how she has noticed that this instrument noisily replaces the ‘deep, slow process’ (x) of the traditional rake, and by implication demonstrates how technology drowns out the sonorous, sensory connection of inner world with the outer. The suggestion seems to be that writings that ‘have nothing to do with the leaf-blower’ (x) form a kind of sonic redress, an alternative soundscape which may keep readers in touch with the land, alerting us to its textures and emotional value, rather than disrupting our connection with it.

The nature of focussing on the aural sense distances ecoseismic writing from an idealised, abstract view of landscape, and connects close-contact and particularity with locality. In his book Ecology Without Nature Timothy Morton has suggested that nature writing and the ecocriticism which accompanies it can be too enmeshed in ‘stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use’ (13). But when listening becomes a kind of porousness to the ground and what lives there, and alertness to sonority becomes a live connection between outer and inner worlds, as with Oswald’s description of raking leaves, a greater sense of physical presence and ecological alertness than Monbiot and Morton suggest can become possible, and this is where ecoseismic writings lay their focus.

If ecoseismology is being used by a gathering of prose writers as a sensory catalyst to address the crisis of ecological breakdown, the question remains of whether this ‘re-enchantment’ by deep listening raises sufficient sympathy for change? In Song of The Earth Jonathan Bate suggested that by reading about and imaginatively inhabiting places, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live in more sympathetic ways, but since this book appeared over ten years ago the ecological crisis
has accelerated and human indifference appears not to have altered quickly enough to prevent many anthropogenic ecological disasters. Work to avoid ecological losses has yet to be sufficient, suggesting the fears expressed by Monbiot may be justified. Whilst being recognisant of a failure of the human mind and imagination to comprehend the scale of crisis, is ecoseismology enough to provoke some imaginative shifts toward change in a world where collective ‘deafness’ and apparent failure of imagination appear to dominate? This is the continuing research question of ecoseismology.

I set out below a summary of the three stages of ecoseismology. After that, to place the particular example of the creative submission, *Otter Country*, in context with these stages and with its ‘parent’ texts, the two iconic otter stories of the twentieth century will be examined in order to expose some early ecoseismic roots and seeds of the ecoseismology thesis.

The early otter writings, Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter* (1927) and Gavin Maxwell’s *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), now seen as iconic nature writing texts, are drawn together in their attempt to raise awareness about the human relationship with a non-human species. Jonathan Bate has said ‘The importance of poets is to be judged by their ability to go on speaking after their death, and in particular to challenge future writers into creation.’ (‘Eco laurels’). If the same can be said about prose writers, this is certainly the case with both Williamson and Maxwell. Their influence and popularity was ‘seismic’ in scale as well as emotional response, and both, although dated in style and approach, are still considered to be giants of British nature writing of their time. These two early otter texts influenced writers from Ted Hughes to Rachel Carson, and implicitly embody a movement towards exposing human treatment of and misunderstandings of the wild, even if they do not raise solutions. The contrasting ways in which both books attracted attention to human destructiveness toward the natural ecosystem will be discussed next. The early evolutionary roots of ecoseismology will be examined amongst these first two otter texts, and this will be discussed after a brief explanation of the three key stages of ecoseismology. The stages will then be expanded in relation to *Otter Country* and some other contemporary nature writings.

The stages that follow will first be applied to the early otter texts:

The first stage of ecoseismology is **encounter.** In this stage, the writer experiences then renders an intense close-up, ground-level sensory encounter with the
wild. In this stage sympathy is established. Through rendering of finely textured, sense-filled, often sonorous or rhythmic description, which I call soundful storying, readers are drawn into the encounter, into contact. The second stage is the **ecoseismic moment**, where the outside world has penetrated the senses and entered the mind and emotions. It may be that the shock of contact or connection during the encounter reverberates and leaves the writer, and possibly the reader, more alert, or more sympathetically aware, or porous to the wild in new ways. There may be a wider ecological perspective or crisis which enters ‘the now’, or a space is suddenly filled with time ‘standing still’, and from here a more ecocentric sensibility becomes possible. The third stage is the **seismic effect**. This stage is where the experience of the first two stages has caused such ripple effects that it has changed the way the writer thinks about the world and her place in it. Everything looks different. Here the shock of recognition of ecological crisis is engaged and questions rise to the surface, provoked by the experience: what changes are to be made to live better and more sympathetically in this beloved home?

The earliest text, *Tarka the Otter* (cited as *Tarka* from now on) although it is fiction, embodies an early version of ecoseismic writing in that it has a deliberate movement from in-depth research where the author paced out his story from an otter’s eye-level, to closely observed, sensory encounter, to creation of sympathy and later to an engagement of outrage when the otter-protagonists are butchered during hunting scenes. In this structure it does embody an early form of ecoseismology.

In the opening descriptions of *Tarka* the story is layered with textured soundscapes that rise from the natural world and draw the readers’ senses: a white owl’s ears listen for ‘the prick of claws of mice on leaves’, (4); water sounds continually fill the ear with trickles, murmurs and ripples; an otter’s breath-bubbles ‘eking out of nostrils […] rise large as oak apples’ (6). Williamson’s gathering of ground-level scenes and engaging the bodily senses by forensically collected sound-texture reveals his method of using sound-sense densely woven into the narrative. This aspect of *Tarka* demonstrates what I have called *soundful storying*. The condensed narrative style and image is akin to a poet’s, even in the sonic translation of the animals’ vocabulary: the female otter utters a ‘thin, wavy, snarling cry […] the bitch’s yinny-yicker, or threat’ (7), and ‘the soft, flute-like whistle’ that is her call to her mate, (8). The heron calls *Kra-a-rk* (2) and the mother otter utters a chiding ‘yikker’ (13) to her cubs and later she
uses ‘an old weasel threat’ (21) translated as ‘Iss-iss-ic-yang!” Even the river is given a voice, heard through the ear of the otter, so sibilant that it ‘stole into the holt and soothed her’. Williamson’s sensitised harnessing of sound opens the ear to the live current of place, (even if the style of expression is anthropomorphically dated), and through it the ecology of location can be more clearly imagined and felt, even down to an imaginative re-enactment of sounds usually inaudible to the human ear, like the tread of mice on leaves, or of bees’ feet on bells of heather (126). Ted Hughes described the intense description in Tarka as having an ‘instinctive loyalty to the spirit of the animal’, (‘An Address’, 160). Place is treated with a similar intensity, especially where Williamson uses Devon vernacular, much of which appeared strange to readers from other regions, and which has now been lost or disappeared from use. Reviewers had complained of excessive and mystifying provincialisms and sporting jargon that were not to be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, and Williamson championed his use of vernacular in an ‘Apologia pro verba mea’, in his 1982 Bodley Head edition of Tarka. Here he claimed these were words commonly used by generations of Devon people and he presented a glossary: the Devon word ‘Channered’ is listed as being used by a marshman speaking of the ‘channered’ guts in the estuary saltings. Williamson translates it as a noun meaning ‘wandering tracks in the salt turf which look as though made by great worms.’ (253). Equally, the term ‘ream’, accused of being unverifiable, is translated by Williamson as being used by water bailiffs of ‘the arrowy ripple pushed by a fish’s dorsal fin, or nose of swimming otter.’ (253). ‘Shillets’ are ‘Throughout the lengths of the Taw and Torridge the stones (generally flat) of the riverbed piled by freshes, freshets or spates, so-called.’ (253) ‘Belving’, an intensely onomatopoeic term taken from a Devon proverb: ‘a belving cow soon forgets her calf’, is used to describe ‘the note of a deep-chested hound.’

Such meeting points between natural sound and human language have been gathered and listed in a more contemporary treatise for the protection of place, where the precision of metaphor and its patterns have become an explicit process of verbal retrieval. Describing the threatened moorlands on the Isle of Lewis, Robert Macfarlane writes of a ‘Counter Desecration Phrasebook’ that was gathered and written down by his friend Finlay MacLeod, an inhabitant of the Hebridean island, in order to reclaim a place known as ‘The Brindled Moor’ and to protect it from being perceived as a barren,
empty wasteland available for development. As with Williamson’s glossary, the language in this ‘phrasebook’ charges the place with particularity, with story, mythology, folklore and territorial/topographical markers. In his essay on the Brindled Moor and the physical relation of language to place Macfarlane suggests that: ‘A slow capillary creep has occurred here, up out of landscape and into language. The result is a lexis so supplely suited to the place that it fits it like a skin.’ [A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’ 2010]. Verbal maps are created in both Williamson’s text and the Gaelic glossary, for instance in the Gaelic list, a ‘Sithean’ (deriving from a sith, meaning a mound or hill suitable for or used by fairies) is a hillock that is thought to be suitably well-drained and topped with green that it might have been attractive to fairies. The vernacular language in both texts acts as a ‘singing up’ of the land’s features, as if it were an aural map. This method could be attributed to the ancient aboriginal conception of songlines, as Williamson (and the authors of the Isle of Lewis glossary) instinctively reach out into the past. By using the sound and sensory aspects of place they create a voiced, precise and poetic ‘ecocentric’ map of the terrain; through this connection of old metaphor to contemporary close observation, a deep, ecological listening is occurring.

The poet John Clare’s method, as he ‘dropt down’ (John Clare By Himself, 38), to collect ground-level, ecocentric detail and sensation is a pertinent precursor to the use of this deep listening and recording of place. In his autobiographical fragments Clare describes his method which seems to be like Williamson’s close-up habit of tuning into sound where every ecological detail that is sensed seems to be recorded. Here Clare records his own ground-level listening:

I noticed the cracking of the stubbs to the increasing sun while I gleand among them  I lovd to see the heavey grasshopper in his coat of delicate green bounce from stub to stub  I listend the hedge cricket with raptures  the evening call of the partridge the misterious spring sound of the land rail that cometh with the green corn

(John Clare By Himself, 38)
Similar listening-in is found in Williamson’s prose as the world is depicted through intense, stacked-up renderings of the particular ecology and sounds of the riverbank’s plants and places. The senses are engaged through the portal of the otter-level landscape, and so we are able to enter imaginatively as readers.

Having alerted our bodily senses, recruited our sympathies and exploited the suggestible nature of the imagination such that we are beginning to merge imaginatively with the animal protagonist, Williamson moves into the third phase of his method and engages shock and trauma. The otters with whom we now identify so strongly encounter hunting packs of bloodthirsty hounds. Having been lulled by ‘the rustling clicks of dragonflies wings’ (25) and ‘the owl’s bubbling quaver’ (29) the otters undergo their ordeals at the hands of humans as the soundscape turns from gentle cadences of harmonious nature into discordant and unnatural cacophonies of shouting, whooping, bellowing and pounding. During one of the final hunting scenes Williamson uses poetic imagery and suggestion at the intersection of the natural and human worlds to make his point about the relentlessness of human brutality. Foreshadowing doom with a description of the skewered hunting larder of mice and bees of the red-backed shrike, a bird ‘with a beak like a bent iron nail’ (177) Williamson goes on to depict a scene where Tarquol, Tarka’s cub, is caught and torn to pieces by hounds:

Among the brilliant hawkbits – little sunflowers of the meadow
– he was picked up and dropped again, trodden on and wrenched
and broken, while the screaming cheers and whoops of
sportsmen mingled with the growling rumble of the hounds at
worry.’ (178)

The scene is redolent with disturbing sounds of the battlefield. To an audience familiar with accounts of trench warfare, the echoes of pounding of gunfire and shells would have been recognisable. The scenes Williamson had experienced during his time in combat during the First World War would have been recognisable. A sonic subtext reverberates in much of the story’s soundtrack, and intensifies here with echoes of battle in the ‘heavy thuds’ and ‘pounding’ (176) in the preceding lines and repeated in the chilling ‘growling rumble’ as the young otter dies in the jaws of the hounds. The
poignant contrast with the ‘— little sunflowers of the meadow—’ is emotionally and morally seismic, weighted to invite an engaged response to the ugly scene. Williamson would be the first to admit that the nature that he portrays in *Tarka* is relentlessly red in tooth and claw and packed with bloody struggles for survival, but the portrayal of the natural ecology of the cycles and food chains in the book is written without much sentimentality and is intended to be justified in terms of animal survival. In contrast, here the death scene is unnatural; we are left to feel intense sympathy for the otters, and sensitised to the natural riverbank cycles, outrage at the senseless treatment by humans. As Ted Hughes said in his ‘Address’, this method ‘does all the work of poetry’. (161).

When *Tarka* is measured up against ecoseismology and the evolving and recently dynamic resurgence of contemporary nature writing, the early seeds of an attempt at ecoseismology can be seen within it. The wild otter in *Tarka* is presented as an animal stoically struggling with repeated crises, many of them (but not all) human-induced, but it appears that in spite of its huge popularity, the book fell short of provoking any immediate change. Otter hunting continued unabated. The author fell from favour due to his ill-judged political pronouncements, (his poetic vision evolved in dangerous directions, less attractive and more widely sinister than the otter-centric one in *Tarka*), and British society was certainly not yet ready to consider giving up on its bloodsports. *Tarka* may have been ahead of its time in its undercurrent of eco-campaigning spirit, but it (and Williamson’s more blatant later writings and pronouncements) became associated with conservatism. In spite of its risky early envisionings of eco-purity it regained some popularity and remained in print. Its ecoseismic intent meant that it sensitised later writers Rachel Carson and Ted Hughes who both said they were profoundly inspired and influenced by it. Carson claimed *Tarka* was a book that ‘deeply influenced’ her (Quaratiello, 29), and Hughes claimed he read the book repeatedly as a boy, stating in his ‘Address’ at Williamson’s memorial that he continued to be spellbound by it as an adult. Hughes acknowledged its influence: ‘it entered into me and gave shape and words to my world as no book has ever done since.’ (160). In spite of its literary influence, *Tarka* came at a time when change was slow to happen. Humans, reluctant to cease their violent pursuit of dominance over the wild, continued otter hunting along with the other popular bloodsports. How far this
kind of cultural pattern continues is a concern to deal with in further ecoseismic writing and research!

Thirty years later the banner of the wild otter was picked up again, this time within Gavin Maxwell’s autobiographical memoir and bestseller, *Ring of Bright Water* (1960), (cited as *Ring* hereafter). It is not clear whether *Tarka* may have had influence over this writer when he chose otters as a subject, but perhaps even if he had read it, for reasons of class and politics Maxwell may not have felt able or willing to acknowledge it.

Kathleen Jamie has stated that *Ring*, which embodied all the ‘derring-do’ suitable for the romantic quest of the solitary upper class male, was highly conservative (‘Diary’, 2011). But can *Ring* be dismissed in the light of Jamie’s political standpoint? Maxwell prefaced his book with words that frame it within a gesture of acknowledgement of man’s ‘separation from the soil’, but as Jamie has disapprovingly suggested in her ‘Diary’ he was a ‘toff’, an upper class land owner in the tradition of those who welcomed the animals they approved of, snatching what they could and murdering the poor creatures they did not find useful. But Jamie’s socio-political and rather prickly standpoint glosses over the broader ecological aims that Maxwell had. Maxwell’s text attempts to propose sympathy with the natural world, but it remains trapped within what Jamie would see as the very conservative tradition of its time, and resounds with the romantic and rather blinkered, limited escape narrative. In many ways in the long-term, however, *Ring* gave a boost to the conservation movement by attracting sympathy along with readers’ attention to the wild places he described. By beginning to draw attention to wildlife and some of its issues, it may have raised awareness of the plight of wildlife, but how far does his method fit or contrast with contemporary ecoseismology?

In his introduction to *Ring* Maxwell states his concern:

> ‘I am convinced that man has suffered in his separation from the soil and from the other living creatures of the world; the evolution of his intellect has outrun his needs as an animal, and as yet he must still, for security, look long at some portion of the earth as it was before he tampered with it.’ (‘Foreword’, 5)
In spite of what Maxwell says in his introduction much of the narrative rhythm in his text comes not from sonorous textures of close contact and concerns (as with Williamson’s tale) but rather rises from within the polished and entertaining prose. The text appears to place the author in a dominant position as a ‘Boys’ Own’ adventurer who translates what he wants readers to see:

I climbed out of the ravine and found myself on a bluff of heather and red bracken, looking down upon the sea and upon Camusfeàrna.

The landscape and seascape that lay spread out before me was of such beauty that I had no room for it all at once; my eye flickered from the house to the islands, from the white sands to the flat green pasture round the croft, from the wheeling gulls to the pale satin sea and on to the snow-topped Cuillins of Skye in the distance.

*(Ring of Bright Water, 11)*

It is not the close-to detail of the land which draws the attention (as with Clare and Williamson), not the ecology or connections, but a Maxwell’s eye-view of the visuals; the sweeping landscapes are framed like an artefact, an aesthetic spectacle to be consumed. Rather than evoking the kind of close-to connection with the land and its creatures that Williamson attempts, Maxwell’s viewpoint is idyllic rather than evocative of ecological details and connections. The cadences and soundscapes of wild nature are absent whilst what we see is dictated through Maxwell’s binocular lens. In speaking of the geese and seabirds at Camusfeàrna he describes: ‘but for the soft, contented murmur of their voices and the sounds of the sea and the waterfall there is utter silence.’ (7). Having read Williamson’s sonorous descriptions this ‘utter silence’ feels like a construct, an idyll, and these days for an audience alert to crisis it appears unsatisfying. As Jamie implies in her critique, it no longer makes sense to think of the landscape as pristine or empty. If it is silent, we should be worried. Where is the wildlife? Probably hiding from Maxwell’s shotgun.
The crude romanticism that Maxwell’s flight from civilisation seems to embody and that frustrates Jamie in her ‘Diary’ feels outdated and limiting. The author is separate from the land, treating it as a commodity. The pets that dominated Maxwell’s narrative were not wild indigenous animals that might have taught something about the ecology of survival; they were tame, diminished playthings. There was nothing in the least bit wild about them, apart from the fact that they could swim beautifully, and deliver a sharp bite. The anthropomorphism in the text often robs them of their wild identity: Mijbil’s ‘short legs, […] tubby, furry torso, vast whiskers and clownish good humour’ (93) were put to use in comedy antics. There may be some anthropomorphism in Williamson’s text, but it is because we are looking at the world from the otters’ point of view and sharing sympathetically in its ecology. In Maxwell’s text we are shown only the perspective of a rather strange, isolated and difficult owner/zoo keeper who harnessed his pet into posing alongside framed Modigliani nudes. Described with comical, constructed anthropomorphic touches the life of these pets was ripe for being further warped by the Disney-fied family film that reached millions and eventually made the death of an otter world news. In the end both Maxwell’s famous otters died violent deaths at the hands of humans, raising the question of whether it was ever justifiable having them as pets in the first place? Probably not as far as the otters were concerned, and although Edal survived ten years she became disturbed, violently unpredictable and had to be fenced in.

So what was Maxwell trying to achieve? He wanted escape from ‘the prison of over-dense communities and close confines of human relationships’ (5), but it seems he was all too human, and frequently needed society to replenish himself. When he stated that ‘man has suffered in his separation from the soil and from the other living creatures of the world’ (5), it appears that personally he failed to make the reconnection he wished for: he travelled to a wild place to ‘look long at some portion of the earth as it was before he tampered with it’ (5), but could not refrain from tampering with his portion. By the time he had finished his trilogy, the peaceful turf had been fenced, the house burned down and the otters were dead.

In terms of ecoseismology, in spite of its datedness and disasters, Ring had a ripple effect: the book sold millions, and raised some much needed awareness about the need for nature conservation in the 1960s and after. It attracted me to the West
Highlands to find otters, and was a catalyst to start my own, updated otter book. Perhaps these were the kind of effects that Maxwell was hoping for? *Ring* is still in print and popular but does not fit ecoseismology in terms of method. As a personal story perhaps the only truly ecoseismic aspect of this book is that it suggests how our wrong-headed and inherently dominant, or even violent attempts to ‘get close to nature’ can fail. *Ring* illustrates how faulty approaches to wild animals can remain embedded in the mainstream, and this salutary effect remains as an uncomfortable reminder.
Ecoseismology in action: *Otter Country* and The New Nature Writing

Taking a fresh look at the human relationship with the wild otter and its habitats, *Otter Country* raises the question of how to find a path towards exploring the animal without damaging further the environment we wish to preserve. The book embodies an emerging learning process about this, and an emerging ecoseismic thinking. If the book has faults they may be around questions of inconsistency: how many trees had to be recycled to produce a print run? What was the book’s entire carbon footprint? How many real wild otters did I bother, or inspire others to bother, during my investigations? On the other hand, what has been the positive impact? The book follows a gradual process of awakening to these questions, and finishes with a closer, more explicitly connected and sympathetic relationship to the ecology of home than it started with.

Finding an acceptable balance is hard to achieve, and for this the book is open ended, the final pages implying further explorations. Inspired by a need to build on the earlier literary approaches to the wild otter in a changing ecological landscape, *Otter Country* is embedded in an ‘ecoseismic’ approach which is increasingly ecocentric. It uses deep listening to ‘drop down’ (to use the phrase coined by John Clare) into immersive sensory contact, but suffers from the usual distractions of modern life.

*Otter Country* forms part of a resurgence of deep listening, self-aware, ecologically alert and subtly campaigning writings on wild nature. This group of writers may not all agree about being placed in the same camp – we would not put a cheetah and a gazelle in the same enclosure but they are part of the same ecology – but for my purposes it includes Kathleen Jamie and Gillian Clarke, examples mentioned before, but also increasingly prose writers, for example Mark Cocker, Tim Dee, Robert Macfarlane and Richard Mabey (this last in fact has been at it for years). What appears to group these writers together is their sensitive, sonorous approaches, and their use of ecoseismology to produce greater attunement to the land. These approaches are aware of lingering romanticism in their nature writings but attend increasingly to close detail of soundscape and carefully chiselled imagery and prose in order to attract attention to change. They lend themselves to an immersive, detailed writing which is attentive to ecological detail, to particularity as well as to nuance. This process, with its emphasis on attentiveness to sound and to listening can be challenging in a sonic environment that
has changed so much in the last hundred years. Now we have what has been coined by Ross Brown in an essay ‘The Human Auditorium’, a distracting ‘permadrone’, a soundscape so packed with white noise and mental distractions that it can be hard to pay attention to detail. Ecoseismology aims to confront the permadrone by bringing us physically to our senses and closer to contact with place. The bodily effects of sound can be profound and altering. The heart can slow, the blood pressure drop and a sense of meditative clarity can be achieved. Could the sonority in written language have similar effects? This close-listening method resonates strongly in the work of certain ecopoets in both technique and approach; ecoseismic writing has points of intersection with the poetry of Alice Oswald in its uses of sonority and musicality. In Oswald’s poem *Dart* the ear-to-the-ground depictions of the river Dart creates a vibrant sibilance and a textured sense of water-soundscape: ‘shhh I can make myself invisible/ […] I can see frogs/ hiding under spawn – water’s sperm – whisper, I wear/ soft colours/ whisper’ (5). Oswald’s use of the sound sense is important enough for her to speak repeatedly about it. In her introduction to the anthology *The Thunder Mutters, 101 Poems For the Planet*, Oswald explains her ethos, using an image from traditional gardening where the sound and motion of raking one’s garden leaves used to put humans in close contact with nature. She states how through this kind of close contact you can ‘hear right into the non-human world (ix) and sound can put ‘our inner worlds in contact with the outer world—a deep, slow process that used to be the remit of the rake.’ (x). Ecoseismic writing renders this kind of closely felt soundscape by making use of poetic techniques of sound, connecting the inner and outer world Oswald speaks of, particularly paying attention to bodily contact with place. In order to actively create reverberations that will lead to connection, awareness and change, ecoseismic writing relies on emotional effects of the sensory and the sonorous, and when it does so places itself at the intersection of poetry and prose. The stages of ecoseismology and how they apply to *Otter Country* and other new nature writings will now be set out in more detail.

Note: the page references to *Otter Country* are from the 2012 published edition of the book cited in the bibliography.
The three stages of ecoseismology:

(i) Encounter

As previously stated, the first stage of ecoseismology is provoked by an initial moment where an intimate encounter with or immersive experience of wild nature occurs. This contact is characterised by a deepening of sensory receptivity and awareness of the surroundings or aspect in question. The soundscape will be prominent in what follows. A recognition of something previously unobserved or ignored takes place through close contact and sensory shifts where the body allows greater receptivity than ever before. A broad spread of bodily sensations, above the purely visual, open the mind to more information. This phase may involve a shock of recognition but also a deepening perception where strangeness and difference are experienced alongside the perceived object-in-itself with all its intricate connections enmeshed within the ecosystem. In Otter Country this manifests itself close to the start of the narrative. Preceding the first otter encounter a gradual merging of self and land occurs, and the narrator experiences sensitisation:

‘My body is churning with the journey, with the trance of tarmac unspooling into sheep, red deer, tumbling streams […] When I try to sleep, surfaces of rock and shivering thrift rise behind my eyelids as if the landscape is already dreaming its way into me. I lie listening to the tick of the engine as it cools, and some time later my sleep is broken by a new sound.’(5)

The prose here is deliberately sibilant with ‘s’ sounds as if what is required and now happening is deep sensitivity to the soundscape. ‘A cracking sound’ (5) announces the experience of the encounter with a wild otter which follows. The rendering of the experience is dominated by a continuity of the alliterative ‘s’: ‘he selects his spot and rolls sinuously over and over’ (6); ‘supple as a rope made out of silk’ (6), and as the watcher crawls towards the animal making ‘the subtlest of sounds’ (6), the last thing visible is the tip of his tail as it is ‘sucked into the glassy sea.’ Sound is arguably the dominant sense, or certainly the most provocative one, in the description of this otter
encounter, as if the immersion of the ear is as important if not more important than the eye. (This section where the first otter is encountered in the narrative, was recorded for transmission on BBC Radio Scotland for its sonority). The descriptive passage following the encounter announces a moment of time where sound is explicitly given precedence over the visual landscape:

‘The air sifts through the grass. An oystercatcher opens its thin red bill and calls in alarm. A freshwater stream dribbles over pebbles nearby; I can smell sheep fleece, layers of wet peat, and sweet bog myrtle. Tufts of sea pink flutter as if the whole earth is flowing with electric current. I want to go after my otter but he’s already melted away.’ (7)

The use of desire in the present tense, ‘I want’, to render the longing vivid and immediate is designed to enhance the emotional, almost-erotic urge of wanting to remain connected with the moment and the animal as if I were ‘ringing’ with the resonance of the encounter. The expression of desire prefaces the repeated attempts to revisit this experience all through the book, as with the swim that follows, where experience has been shifted down to water-level to bodily merge with the energy of the living animal:

Every molecule of my blood thrills and my breath is squeezed out in one shout. [...] it also gives an otter’s-eye view, where I’m on more equal terms with water. As the green cold seeps into me, I’m no longer towering above and separate but embodied within it. (25-6)

As if the diver sheds her human skin, the encounter provokes attempts to achieve some kind of transformative effect of the animal on the human senses, and the ecoseismic urge is to recapture and recreate the experience in prose. The experience of the ecoseismic moment is akin to ‘literary epiphany’ but not polluted by abstract notions of the natural idyll or some kind of quasi-spiritual enlightenment. More, it is a renewal of a sense of sympathy, including a merging which may leave the author with heightened clarity and greater ‘porousness’ to the wild. The numb, everyday membranes have been
punctured and the world of contact has seeped in. The experience will then, in the case of a writer, be apparent in the way she experiences, recognises and later represents the world. Inevitably this may also inspire the writer to be more acutely self-aware than before and leave her sensitised to her part in the crisis in the natural world. The encounter may resonate through the body and the emotions at a somatic or pre-verbal level and we are shaken, our membrane of inactivity or inattention penetrated by something from outside ourselves: now a mossy bank with some fungi growing through it might begin to feel like an extension of our own skin; the sound of insect wings amongst leaves reverberates in our ears, the flow of water in a river might feel as if it flows in the veins inside the body. This merging I have named ‘ecoseismic’ because it begins with a shock that may reverberate through every aspect of a writer’s being, like a seismic event in the body of the Earth, or a struck tuning fork.

Encounters of this sort may be commonplace as a catalyst to heightened experience but often receptivity can be difficult due to mind-numbing distractions, accumulated layers of meaning, quasi-spiritual conceptions that blur perception. Far from being abstracted, or an enraptured moment of spiritual awe or quasi-mystical revelation, the moment’s clarity may simply announce a physical resonance, and the discovery of a renewed sense of belonging through direct contact. This ‘new’ recognition is in fact an ancestral sense, one that human ancestors would have found familiar. The encounter may be experienced bodily, in a non-verbal way, and then intensely as the person has been sensitised. The point here is that once deeper listening has begun to occur, ‘longing’ is mobilised. Longing is used here with echoes of its fitting within the word ‘belonging’ as if the experiencer is reunited with some lost physical sense of ‘at homeness’ with the wild. In the same way as Jonathan Bate has identified the roots of ‘ecopoetics’ as the making of home in The Song of the Earth, the word ecoseismology includes ‘eco’ from the Greek ‘oikos’ meaning ‘home’ or ‘dwelling place’, but the science of seismology is incorporated. Seismology works to sense vibration and the movement of shock waves of energy and sound in the earth, so in ecoseismology we sense shock about the land and our part in it. The listening device in this case is the human bodily senses, tuned to experience the effects of the outside, capture and recreate them. In ecoseismology, the listener feels as if she has crossed a
boundary of everyday ‘deafness’ to a state of greater sensitivity and receptivity, to have part of the world revealed before her as more tangible and intelligible.

(ii) The Ecoseismic moment

This stage of ecoseismology involves not lofty reverence or anything mystical but clear recognition of crisis outside and possibly inward crisis on the part of the writer, reuniting her with what it is to be human and detached yet an intricate part of the natural world, effectively a paradoxical part of the wild, who loves yet damages it. In the case of the process behind *Otter Country*, I became physically ill, perhaps partly from the shock of these realisations, but also because I was enabling myself to feel. Making the connection that the pain of the body and its illness were part of the illness of the body’s world I had to slow down my pace of life, eventually giving up my day job and devoting myself to this new focus of exploration, reconnection and writing.

The question may remain of how then to ‘be’ in this destructive, consumerist age, how to exist equably with a sympathy which can be painful due to awareness of guilt and separation, and yet hopeful all at once. This crisis may be perceived as internal or external, as environmental or as individual sickness or wider collective moral crisis, or all of these combined and connected, but it will eventually and increasingly be visible as the motivating fuel for breaking into new ground for the writer. In *Otter Country* this is manifested in a dramatic realisation, or what has been called a ‘return to the senses’ (Thoreau, 13):

I can’t watch the news; it’s too upsetting. Any amount of noise makes me jump. There is no longer a protective membrane between me and the outside world. […] I suddenly think of how many times I have eliminated my slug and snail population with pellets that are probably toxic to the whole ecosystem. What horrors are in my concentrated washing up liquid and my cleaning products, and where are they ending up? (71)
This kind of recognition will be ‘seismic’ for the writer, who may make the leap imaginatively from the issue of small individual actions to distressing global environmental issues. A mental movement away from estrangement from the world and towards change and more coherent ecological understanding might follow. This ‘seismic’ activity will be the single most important motivator for the next stage, the writing. John Burnside has approached the issue of awakening to discomfort with cultural numbness and disconnection which he calls ‘a nostalgia for the present’ (Burnside, 2012). Like Monbiot, Burnside is uncomfortably aware of the ‘deep semi-consciousness’ or ‘dreamworld’ (‘With Eyes Wide Shut’, 2003) in which we exist and often laments it, advocating re-engagement with the natural cycles of the land, its seasons and creatures in much of his poetry, particularly where he taps into vestigial memory to contend with disconnect. By exploring re-engagement with ancient cultural practises such as seasonal local rituals like beating the bounds or finding kinship with a totem animal, Burnside reengages with the ‘oikos’ or home-place and its creatures. He begins his poem ‘The Light Trap’ by naming his discomfort: ‘Homesick for the other animals,/at midnight, in the soft midsummer dark,/we rigged a sail of light [...] and counted moths.’ (The Light Trap, 23). In an article for the Guardian newspaper, ‘The Hyena is my favourite – my totem-animal’, he again draws attention to what he calls ‘nostalgia for the animals’. Here Burnside suggests we exist with a ‘homesickness’ for an ancient, lost connection with animals, and suggests renewal of our kinship with an internal creaturely world if we are to remain fully human and living in the present. An internal, imaginative act is what Burnside proposes in his article, as if we should become what he describes as an ‘amateur shapeshifter’: ‘To become, to partake, to rediscover a sympathy with a totem animal in order to reveal the hidden self’s full creatureliness.’ This longing for imaginative assimilation of the animal into the self’s internal life suggested by Burnside is echoed in Otter Country through ecoseismology, but Otter Country goes further than Burnside’s expression of longing and loss by suggesting a more explicit acting-out of the physicality of tracking a creature. In Otter Country the quest for physical contact is what is needed before the imaginative and political act of writing:
I climb the bank and scale a small tree [...] In a last sliver of reflected light something on the water distracts me. It’s moving like an animal but made out of liquid. [...] A long mud-brown slither becomes more creature than branch. I see a smooth head; the contours of a brown face with ears, whiskers and the dark holes of two nostrils flowing purposefully downstream. (73-4)

Without recourse to residual ancient belief and ritual as Burnside suggests in his advocacy of finding a totem animal, the search for connection and contact in *Otter Country* re-engages with creatureliness by both imagining the real wild otter, and tracking it down. The encounter becomes a physical, contemporary ritual which our hunting and tracking forbears may have recognised. In the past this may have been completed with the death of the otter, but no longer. The contemporary tracking in *Otter Country* illustrates that once encountered, the wild otter becomes a tangible part of the community of beings to be alert to, to engage with in the home area, and contact with it becomes a sign of one's awareness of the vitality and well-being of local ecology.

As modern lifestyle often lacks much contact experience of this sort, close encounter generally has to be sought out through a process of careful, almost meditative practise. The stillness required to see an elusive and sensitive wild animal such as the otter usually needs a process of patient quietness, sensory alertness and intuition. Indigenous or aboriginal language and culture still resonate with these processes in versions of beliefs and shamanic practises, expressed in ritual stories of shape-changing and dreamtime. Australian Aboriginal Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann of the Ngangikurunkurr tribe (a highly onomatopoeic and resonant tribal name which translated means ‘deep water sounds’) describes this in her culture as a learned awareness, passed down over generations for over 40,000 years, called ‘Dadirri’ which roughly translated means ‘deep listening’ and ‘quiet awareness’. What Miriam Rose describes below appears to be akin to the ecoseismic moment in its immersive and deliberate search for moments of understanding. Here Miriam Rose helpfully explains:

When I experience *dadirri*, I am made whole again. I can sit on the riverbank or walk through the trees; even if someone close to me has
passed away, I can find my peace in this silent awareness. There is no need of words. A big part of dadirri is listening. Through the years, we have listened to our stories. They are told and sung, over and over, as the seasons go by. […] In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn […]

In Otter Country learning was required to attune to the present in this way, by listening to the soundscape of place, with awareness and sensitivity to something of this culture of the past. The sounds, ideas and rituals expressed in aboriginal culture have apparently disappeared from the earshot of daily life but the ecoseismic moment reconnects this important but largely lost skill of the human aural interaction with their surroundings. When it is brought more fully into the consciousness, eventually awareness of the connection between the local, the particular, and wider ecological crisis will enter as well. Just as with the unpredictable but growing threat of what is thought to be anthropogenic climate change, certain species are diminishing, so humans are threatened. Poignantly, many indigenous human communities are suffering, largely unnoticed by the wider world. The Yup’ik Eskimo people of Alaska may soon have to move to urban areas, leaving behind thousands of years of culture and identity connected with place as floodwater from melting ice forces the nearby Ninglick River to rise and wash away their ancestral homeland. The people could be subsumed into an urban area, and their culture diluted or lost. It is ironic that communities who detect and might have held the key to action on the environment are not being heard, and are being gradually silenced.

This illustrates the wider human indifference and a ‘dream state’ of denial that George Monbiot (2003) speaks of, and these losses and threats to biodiversity of species connect human plight to the plight of the animal community. The Yup’ik will not be heard before it is too late, and the polar bears will face a worse fate as the sea ice melts. Sympathy with these wider interwoven relationships rises in the ecoseismic moment: if I were to walk to work, or to eat less meat, or save water, could I make a difference? In theory, ecoseismic writing could create renderings of the particular, to issues of losses and to the effects of climate change, drawing attention to the wider environment.
Written into deliberately affecting, sonorous texts these might inspire wider ‘hearing’ of the crisis, by deeper connecting with place, and hold the possibility of provoking change.

This difficulty of reconnecting the particular and the general arises in the places and communities examined by poet and essayist Kathleen Jamie. In *Findings* much of the writing seems to be characterised by a sense of discomfort with lingering romantic sensibility and a suspicion of overly aesthetic writing. Jamie’s position appears to connect a hostility around ‘prayerful’, spiritual practises to overly embellished ways of writing about nature and the wild. In the first chapter Jamie evokes the ancient seasonal rites of the winter solstice but this modern rite is evidently verging on the ‘spiritual’ for her when in ‘Darkness and Light’ she ironises her own search for the darkness during the solstice, and laughs on finding artificial light in the chambered cairn Maes Howe. When Jamie is invited to celebrate the solstice among friends, she immediately signals a reticence about ritual and religion which is characteristic of her writing. Perhaps an adherence to the spiritual or romantic for Jamie is akin to the dream state that Monbiot speaks of. Her writing exhibits these acts of tension between connection and distancing as if she wishes to acknowledge the romantic heritage of nature writing yet resistance the romantic sensibility where she can. The invitation to celebrate the solstice arrives ‘quietly’, ‘like a coded message’ as if there is some kind of general shame or covert behaviour involved in recoursing to ritual. During the celebration Jamie’s reticence about any kind of clichéd spirituality appears again as ‘in the warm candlelight we enjoyed a half-joking, symbolic meal.’ This notion of ‘half-joking’ implies ambivalence, and suggests that we might be so far removed from our ancestors’ understanding of the pulse of natural cycles that any movement toward honouring the memory of the ritual of the solstice and its marking of the turning season locally would be awkward and embarrassing. The opportunity is an important one for Jamie: although her book is categorised as ‘nature writing’ and as such is part of an honourable tradition of cataloguing and responding to the human relationship with the natural world and its cycles, she seems to wish to break with a nostalgic, romantic past. Here she acknowledges the problem: ‘Pity the dark’ (3) she says, illustrating metaphorically how she views the simple darkness (and by implication, the wild) as having been overused and abused in literature, romanticised, forced into cliché, or at worst demonised and
marginalised. In turn, any quasi-spiritual ‘beautiful’ writings might also be too polarised, conservative or staid for her liking. Like Burnside, Jamie laments some lost understanding or connection but she does not recourse to romantic or new age romantic tropes for an answer. Her writing is aware of what has been written before, but her ethos is mindful, questioning, and characterised by reticence about suggesting (as Burnside does) that we need to ‘reconnect’ more openly or in any clichéd way. Her ethos is to break from the lexicon of ‘new age’ romanticism which might be overly aestheticized or suggest a return to ‘old ways’ and that might taint modern and contemporary writings on nature. Instead, by her reticence Jamie establishes an uncomfortable detachment from rejuvenating our most ancient ancestral connections, and while throwing light on them, she draws back from suggesting a general remedy of reconnection as Burnside does and as other ‘new nature’ writings might do. For Burnside, writing can associate with old rites and bond us to place and community, and Jamie is as wary of this as she is of a suspiciously quasi-religious or aesthetic stance. Her writing seeks to refresh nature writing not with aesthetic verbal gymnastics or nostalgia but a quest for something, new, contemporary and fresh.

In contrast to Jamie’s reticent approach and deliberately spartan language, and Burnside’s call for imaginative creatureliness, an ecoseismic recreation of contemporary rituals of contact are made extravagantly through the senses in *Otter Country*. This sensory approach is less nervous of the romantic influences of the past than Jamie. It includes the metaphor, sensory language and precise detail used by its predecessors, although it is unsentimental in approach, and driven by awareness of its place in the continuity of the nature writing tradition. Where Wordsworth found ‘spots of time’ to consider and clarify his place in the natural world, *Otter Country* engages the senses and seeks a bodily response, attempting to strike the reader’s internal ecology and raise awareness of its connection with outer ecologies. Rendering moments of deep, still listening and close observation, the prose is designed to reactivate a sensory relationship with the natural world that urban modernity might have suppressed. Through this experiencing and rendering of particular places and their aspects, bodily sensitisation to tactile or sonic experience of the wild is activated in order to raise a new kind of ecoseismic sensibility:
So we take our noses closer in, nostrils alert, and inhale the pungent, low-level forest saturated with moisture; a colourful tangle of dark-red sundew, liverworts and mosses look like some kind of primordial ooze, or the interconnected organs of a living creature. (*Otter Country* 150)

An intense and concentrated encounter followed by clarity of perception, kinship, sympathy and connection characterises the ecoseismic moment. The human senses do their best to pick up what is there, as we render ourselves vulnerable, as David Abram reveals in his work, *Becoming Animal*, to be porous to the heightened experience of ‘reciprocity’ of human immersion in the natural world. Through sensory depictions and awareness of science and classification, images of contact are blended; listening, looking, smelling, touching, tasting the natural world are brought to the forefront of description and change is invited in: ‘all that fragility. We need to get down on our knees and pore over it to keep it safe.’ (*Otter Country*, 151)

This immersive sensory experience pours into the writing to create sympathy, set down on the page almost as if a process of ‘exquisite listening’ is occurring. The aim is to produce a contagion of experience, an integrated somatic understanding which may have ripple effects in a wider or enlightened understanding, informed by crisis.

As we draw in breath and sound, we exhale ‘song’ and representation, in sympathy with our surroundings. This is part of an ancient tradition of perceiving and representing the world, a method which may appear broken but which is still identifiable in ‘Dadirri’. Here, exquisite listening can be defined by the contextually different although resonant therapeutic practise of deep listening to a speaking sufferer or patient (in this case a two-way process or exchange between the writerly self and the tangible aspects of the natural world) to gain a sense of clarity and contact. This process of energised concentration has also has been called ‘flow’ by psychologist Mihály Csikzentmihályi (*Flow*, xi). Flow here means concentrated and open-minded moments of alert stillness and listening which allow previously unnoticed thoughts, observations and sensory experiences to rise to the surface and give rise to a sense of inner and outer integration. As a therapist will act like a contemplative, passively waiting for whatever might rise, the writer listens in this way, without expectations: in
**Otter Country** this concentration or flow occurs during many still moments, for example: ‘I let my mind go gentle, become a receptive vessel, allow sounds and shapes to ‘ooze and crawl’ on their own into my senses. Only then can I feel what is there and try to bring some of it into focus.’ (149). In ecoseismic moments when language rises it can be recorded in the memory and reconstructed in writing with or without some reflections on what they might mean:

I sit for hours meditating on the water surface. Periodically everything blurs, then clears. The reeds move imperceptibly, oozing with continuous sibilance. […] Mostly, nothing happens. But nothing is good. I drop into stillness. My mind empties. The rain on the roof is a thousand pattering fingers. […] Listening to the quiet echo in the reeds, I can’t help thinking of it shadowed with patterns and songlines. Moving like a fluid map, reeds whisper. Water trickles. A bird flickers through the air. It is a breathing web and neither the map nor my words can do it justice. (142)

The flow captured above is characterised by an intense ‘wakefulness’ or presence of being, and sometimes a desire to put oneself into the skin of the object described in order to bring us into a more ecocentric sympathy with the wild. This might require some perilous activity, some risk, and close contact with the elements; getting cold, or wet, or stumbling in the dark, but these things add to the vividness of the experience.

The ecoseismic moment then is a state of being that is as comfortable with physical perils, with achieving a vivid sensory experience through an evocative set of written lines, as were the romantic poets. In the tradition of the solitary romantic, (a sturdily male gaze on nature-as-spectacle, as in Wordsworth and more recently in Maxwell’s account, and residually in the contemporary travel and nature writings of Robert Macfarlane), experience is transformed into the ‘lone enraptured female’ experience. In tradition with the past, but questing for something other than a dreamlike longing for an idyllic lost state, or a quest for ownership, in *Otter Country* the female author as ecoseismic writer abandons nostalgia for a search that acknowledges the masculine experience but reclaims the terrain, and the page, translating her own state of
rapture and treading upon what might once have been male territory. As Kathleen Jamie suggested in her subversive and biting critique of Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*, ‘A Lone Enraptured Male’, the white, middle class Englishman feels as if he has a right ‘to boldly go, ‘discovering’ then quelling our harsh and lovely and sometimes difficult land with his civilised lyrical words.’ With *Otter Country*, the ‘harsh and lovely’ ground is entered by the female author as she steps in with her feminine perspective – and her different version of rapture that is not about ownership or conquering. This feminine perspective is about the senses but also about humility, patience, contemplation and a spirit of curiosity, of learning about the connective animal community which inhabits the wet and hidden places. The overlooked, unvoiced edges of the land and their fragile tissue of ecosystems are voiced.

As the ‘lone enraptured’ poet I trod upon terrain previously mapped and claimed by a canon of male voices, and was aware as I crossed another boundary, that of the poet and writer entering into the world of science, and crossing into areas of previously polarised expertise owned by specialists who may or may not have welcomed the questing of an ignorant, unscientific and splashy-footed female. My science experts may have been uncomfortable with *Otter Country* as an exercise in a kind of ‘hybrid’ writing which interleaved aspects of ‘popular’ science with more subjective, sensory experience. Here tribalism and divisions of other sorts raised themselves; science quests to be objective, and experts may have been disgruntled or uncomfortable with my unorthodox mixture of registers. This kind of nature writing, which defies categorisation in its mixture of memoir, research, fact and impression, and deliberately refuses impersonal authority, might unsettle or dissatisfy the scientific canon. It aimed to refresh the terrain but in some cases may have risked offending the more rigid scientific readers particularly if its range and rhetoric was not to their taste. More than this, experts reported on in the north may not have agreed with experts from the south (as seen with the debate between Jamie and Macfarlane), and the interesting and delicate balance of not offending either by prioritising one or other argument came into play. I found the tribal or polarised behaviour of some of the experts mirrored the differences in the local behaviour of otters, and this (in both cases) might have been due to one or more factors: geographical, social, geological, or meteorological. In short, my travelling quest gave a prismatic view of what was there, both in terms of the human and the
animal. Bringing all this information home to write up, I became acutely aware of another thorny issue. The sensitivities of expert, interested party, personal acquaintance and the privacy of family all meant editorial decisions – common to the creation of a nonfiction memoir – that concerned persons close to the author. In effect this meant that tactfully I left out parts of the exploration and in some cases the tenderer parts of the debate.
The blinkered, or muffled, thoughtless ‘dream state’ that George Monbiot identifies around climate change denial is challenged in various ways amongst the ecoseismic writers: Burnside suggests a contemporary reconnecting with what seems to him to be an important link to the natural world by addressing one’s homesickness for animals and choosing a totem to integrate one’s creatureliness. Jamie questions the romantic and advocates rethinking our ideas of ‘the dark’ and ‘the natural/wild’: I acknowledge my influences, of my original childhood attraction to the images of tame, owned animals-viewed-as-pets or as extensions to suburban or comforting domesticity, and then undergo a purging of them by a bodily baptism in the wild. If the romantic idyll is no longer comfortable, it might represent something which conceals ecological threat: I immerse myself in the cold and wet of a marsh to learn more about the wild otter. I listen to the science but quest for my own experience of the otter. I let go of the literary canon in favour of a new kind of representation, not to tame, collect or dominate but to sympathise, understand and respect; to hear what all that I discover might raise or suggest.

The previously polarized masculine domain of going into wild nature to write about it became more inherently my line of attack, especially when on my journey I encountered experts and writers who were all, without exception, male, and presented themselves to inform me of ‘the facts’. Although I did not raise the issue of gender at the time, or make it explicit in my narrative (to avoid further polarization), the established authority was strikingly evident, and frequently present in my mind. The seismic effect of all of these moments of realisation engenders change, a gentle questioning of that authority, and a re-writing or re-mapping of what was there.

In terms of encountering the wild otter on its own terms at water-level, (‘We are eye to wild eye; its face is armed with a startling array of walrus bristles. […] There is nothing shy about this animal.’ 153) my own contacts with the animal provoked a final realisation: ‘there is nothing shy about this animal’, ‘shy’ being a cliché often used to depict this creature. Through the
shock of the encounter a more ecocentric understanding and perspective was engaged.

The seismic effect, where the writer reconfigures the way he/she thinks of and interacts with the natural world, can follow; unsentimental, authentic, charged with change: ‘I must be printed on that otter’s retina as it is upon mine […] meaning all the contours of danger.’ (153). The scales of the close-up and the global come together in a moment of realisation: ‘as far as it is concerned, we have only ever been one of the earth’s dangers […]’. Kathleen Jamie’s writing displays a similar characteristic of shifting perspective and shock during visual encounter with a moth in *Sightlines*. In the chapter entitled ‘Magpie Moth’ Jamie examines a moth through a magnifying glass, and immediately afterwards demonstrates the shock of re-orientating herself back to the wider visual landscape:

> I stood up too quickly, swooned a little, because there was the wide moor, the loch, the breezy grasses reaching for miles, all scaling up to meet me. I’d been absorbed in the miniscule: a moth’s eye, a dab of lichen; been granted a glimpse into the countless millions of tiny processes and events that form the moor. Millions! (176)

With the shifting down to the close-up, small-scale ‘tiny processes,’ Jamie’s sympathy is engaged as if the process of the sensory investigation has had an alchemical effect. Just as a seismograph detects vibrations, the human senses effect an imaginative translation of the scale of what is there; the mysterious is confronted and the rich textures of the wild revealed. The seismic effect of these encounters propels us to become outwardly and explicitly sympathetic to a more ecocentric sense of the world, resolved to act, whether it is to become part of a deliberate literary movement, to re-imagine the scale of environmental crisis, or to envision the effects and the scale of enlightened actions and reactions. This is change that can be ‘seismic’ in that it implies a re-tuning, a break from old behaviours, and a reconfiguring of creative thought and expression to new adherences. In this Kathleen Jamie might fit into the ecoseismic
bracket, especially in her essays from *Findings* and *Sightlines* where she has actively resisted idealisation of nature amongst writers. In her ‘Diary’ (2011) published in the London Review of Books she engages politically where she critiques a dated, conservative ‘boy’s own’ style of masculine writing in *Ring of Bright Water* and also in her review of Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*, ‘A Lone Enraptured Male’. Jamie's condensed, thought-provoking writings call for a reconfiguration of the way we think about nature, and if we apply to her writings what John Burnside has said of poetry as

‘an ecological discipline of the richest and subtlest kind. Writing is thus a political act: one which expresses not the agendas of special interest groups, but the search for an appropriate manner of dwelling on the earth.’ (‘Strong Words’, 261)

- Jamie’s expression can be seen as politically engaged. Jamie’s writing may be more concentrated on the eye, more condensed and less exuberant than some of the sonorous effects employed by the kind of ecoseismology set out above, but nevertheless it has a degree of the seismic effect about it. Jamie’s essays suggest her position appears to be about challenging complacent thought, and while she questions the idea that the human is somehow separate or divorced from nature and the wild her response to the idea of nature is deeply probing: In ‘Pathologies’ she asks of nature: ‘What was it exactly? And where did it reside?’ (*Sightlines*, 23), pointing the finger suspiciously at the reverent attitudes expressed at a nature conference she attends. Jamie appears sceptical of the simplistic exhortations about reconnection with nature, demonstrating her hostility to romanticised views and concluding with deep irony that ‘the last wolf was shot long ago’ and that nature is certainly not all ‘primroses and otters’ (24). Jamie distances herself from the abiding attitude of the speakers at the nature conference, uncomfortable with the ‘reverent talk’ of ‘transformative experiences’ and feels that it does not make sense to be nostalgic about some idyllic past. In terms of the sonority discussed in this thesis, Jamie is an acute listener, but concentrates more on the act of looking. In *Sightlines* in her ‘Pathologies’ essay she reaches an ecoseismic moment by other means; she uses the visual sense over the aural, as in the ‘Magpie Moth’ chapter. By attending to
nature under the visual lens of the microscope, she reveals nature as inside us all and shifts understanding of it as something not necessarily benign: ‘not dolphins arching clear from the water, but the bacteria that can pull the rug from under us.’ (24). In order to achieve this visual clarity she appears to dislodge a simplistic view of the romantic, redemptive qualities of nature as she witnesses nature in cancer cells proliferating under the lens of a microscope, and works towards understanding of this paradoxical aspect of nature: ‘We need disease to dance us on our way; we need to halt it if we’re to live morally.’ (37) It is the paradox of this idea ‘like boxing hares’ (37) which is the moment of epiphany, the seismic moment, for Jamie: ‘The inner body, plumbing and landscapes and bacteria. The outer world also had flown open like a door, and I wondered as I drove and I wonder still, what is it that we’re just not seeing?’ (37).

The final rhetorical question is characteristic of Jamie’s visual sightline; she has viewed that nub of truth that we are for the most of the time ‘not seeing’ and she is gently drawing attention to it. The implication of the question of what we are ‘just not seeing’ is the seismic element in the moment. Its repercussions subvert dominant and traditional conceptions of the locality of ‘nature’ and suggest a seismic change in thinking about our conception of what and where nature is and what effect it might have on humans.

* The seismic effect in Otter Country moves from sympathy, from deep listening and close observation to the political; to personal acts of resistance (driving more slowly, giving up one’s car, cycling, not owning a mobile phone). Thus the effect embodies what Burnside calls ‘a political act’, a search for more sympathetic and ecocentric ways of inhabiting the earth.

In the chapter ‘Hunting Ground’ seismic effect is drawn during post mortem where the invisible is revealed in gory detail. The internal ecology of the animal killed by a vehicle on a road, that is the inside of the otter, its tissue, organs and skeleton, is opened up to reveal further possibilities of anthropogenic damage. The shock here is that we are all implicated in this death. At the same time the a sense of sympathy is
generated as an ancestral connection of the animal to the human is evoked. This section of the book responds to forensic examination by framing the human-animal connection in an intense passage which ends with the heart of the animal in the author’s hands. There is no looking through microscope or lens, but between the writer and her subject is a visceral, primitive connection of ancestry and kinship where the senses of touch, taste and texture are engaged. Jamie’s implicit treatise that we need to shift our perspective to incorporate wider conceptions of nature is mirrored in this section of *Otter Country* where the boundaried separateness we take for granted between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ is shown to be unstable. When a close-up description of the internal workings of the dead otter is examined on the cutting slab, the ‘ecoseismic’ approach is used to ‘feel’ inside the body of the otter. Sensory images of smell and taste are employed to evoke sympathetic response: ‘In my throat the aroma of blood and fur and sinew begins to sting. It scorches the back of my tongue and will stay with me for days.’ (272). The visual and tactile – ‘organs undulating with reds: scarlet, plum, deep maroon […] the liver which is so slippery it moves unexpectedly when I carry it to the weighing scales.’ (275, 276) – are used to emotional effect, and give rise to questions of ‘kinship’ in both senses of the meaning of the word, through a primal response to the smell, shape, structure and texture of this creature, provoking the unexpected physical and emotional reactions of nausea and grief: ‘an ache in my throat.’ (274). The implicit suggestion in the lines of there being more than just sympathy but a sense of a common ancestor and a continuing relationship is provoked by the view of the otter’s similarities to the structure and workings of the inside of a human, and creates an emotional connection in terms of sympathetic affinity:

‘Her tender movements remind me of the doctor who examined my daughter when she broke her wrist. […] She shows me where some otters have strange wear around the enamel at the base of the teeth, and I’m reminded of my own teeth. […] The deeply wrinkled feet look worn, like the feet of an old person who has walked a long way. […] And the heart. The heart, a shining dark maroon, cupped in my hands. […] I don’t want to let it go, this small, perfected heart, but in the end I have to.’
The holding of the heart suggests emotional repercussions which involve both interpretations of the kinship of humans and this wild predator, (connoting both family and affinity and/or sympathy). Rather than destabilising concepts of what or where nature is, as in Jamie’s exploration, an emotional spectrum of human-animal connection is plumbed here and a more integrated relation uncovered. In this part of the text the focus is implicitly in the connection of emotional and bodily effects in the forensic examination and is rendered as sensory effects concentrated upon the smells, colours and textures of the experience. The seismic effect upon the reader is designed to be implicit, provocative and emotional rather than lucidly critical as in Jamie’s method.
Ecoseismology and Writing the New Nature

On July 6 2012 at a symposium entitled ‘Writing the New Nature’ held at Bath Spa University, Richard Kerridge suggested in his address that the time had come for writing about nature to take on the environmental crisis by actively entering or embodying new forms. What this new shape or form should be was not stated, only that it should be new, and that it needed to address crisis. Ecoseismic writing is an evolving form that is engaged, affecting and driven by this focus on response to crisis. Its recent increased production appears to be a synchronous response to the call expressed by Kerridge. Its expressions often have affinities with poetry and yet it is not published as poetry. It is usually narrative non-fiction prose which is authored by a poet or a ‘would-be poet’. If that epithet sounds insulting, it is not intended to be; it appears that so far there is not a critical term for this new wave or group of writers who adhere themselves to poetic technique when writing of the natural world. ‘Ecoseismic writers’ will have to do for now. A recent example is Tim Dee whose displays of ecoseismology in his new book will be discussed now. Dee claims not to be a poet or ever to have published any poetry, but motivated by a desire to reach a wider readership than the contemporary – and limited, in terms of readers – poetry audience, his writing launches an appeal that aims to reach readers through the ears and the senses.

Tim Dee’s new book is an example would-be poetry, or poetic prose, and it brings all the stages of ecoseismology together. *Four Fields* (2013) is a journey through four landscapes whose ecologies are deeply affected and damaged by a long history of human interference. The narrative is rife with listening, beginning with the sonorous, dense imagery of close-up encounter, and with resonant poetic techniques of suggestion and subtle renderings of sensation and moments of thought. As Kathleen Jamie notes in her review ‘Four Fields’ in The Guardian newspaper, he is a radio man, and a good listener. Dee’s technique is highly sensitive to soundscape and sound-effect. He is also an avid bird-listener: ‘An outing with him is a lesson in listening; several poets owe what listening skills we have to Dee's tuition’ Jamie says in her review, and this is evident on almost every page. Here we see the encounter and his attention to sonority as he is standing listening in the desert:
‘[… a small bustard the colour of dry grass, dribbled its liquid croak. A sundowner: a cork eased from a bottle and followed by a glug. A common tit-babbler, stowed in its bundle of mimicry the sound of water droplets, […] a karoo long-billed lark, a grey-backed sparrow lark, a lark-like bunting, a spike-healed lark, a Stark’s lark, […] a dune lark, its back the same colour as the sand it had walked on, lifting like thrown sand from the dune into its song-flight, a shower from an open beak that scratched like grass, carried easily through the desert air […] The desert given wings.’ (Four Fields, 79)

The above extract was found from a random opening of the pages, and is typical of his image-ridden, textured, sense-alert encounters. In its playful use of sound it resonates with Alice Oswald’s ear-close, rhythmic, deep-listening poetry. As well as being firm friends with Jamie, (and no doubt Oswald), Dee also produces poetry programmes on BBC Radio and his sensitive ear reflects this role. In much of Four Fields Dee appears as much a poet as Jamie or Alice Oswald.

Dee’s fourth field contains the most deeply ecoseismic moments, where he is visiting the ruined wasteland of Chernobyl, the still radioactive ‘Zone’ where the trees won’t grow and the few birds that survive suffer shocking deformities. Listening in that disturbingly barren place, Dee undergoes the seismic effect as he laments that ‘nothing speaks to nothing.’ (190) The emotional reverberation of this bland statement is enough to engage and mobilise the seismic effect in the reader. This haunting place collides with our own, as we re-imagine the horrifying repercussions of this world and that of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring.

The same kind of ecoseismic effect of shock and lament appears in poet Jean Sprackland’s prose examination of a beach near her home. Strands, A Year of Discoveries on the Beach was published within a few months of Dee’s book, and portrays distressing piles of plastic washed up on the author’s daily beach walks. Sprackland begins to re-imagine the enormity of the polluting plastic waste that we have produced since its invention. She realises it is now ‘ubiquitous’ (104), and aware that this plastic is destroying delicate ecological balances out at sea, she laments the plastic
discovered in the stomachs of endangered seabirds ‘in this age of death by plastic’ (116).

Sprackland’s imaginative focus shifts between scales, from the closely felt beach to the far away plastic floating in vast islands in the Pacific, and then back to the detritus found most commonly:

Toothbrushes, cigarette lighters, Lego bricks and bottle tops.

It’s the familiarity – the domesticity – of these, small, disposable objects which breaks the heart. (104)

In both these poets’ writings, (and I am audaciously categorising Dee as a poet) there is a movement from place to place, from the near, to the far away, and back as conceptions of the local crash into the global. We move from word-sound to the shock of collision of scale, where widening of perspective on the environment is catalysed through close-up ecological and sensory connections. The approach of these last two ecoseismic texts is to recognise a web of living, interpenetrative connections between the wild and the human. When recounted in the aesthetic framework of richly evocative, aesthetically affecting or sonorous language which has a musicality in itself it can create a profound, ‘seismic’ affect upon the reader. In creating a literary form that is emotionally and imaginatively accessible and within which images of the natural world are revealed and resound in recognisable framework, ecoseismology knits itself into the fabric of the cultural subtext of ecological crisis, producing something self-conscious and deliberate, connected to romantic roots, perhaps, but also thoroughly modern in its concerns. This wave of writings is aware of its own irony, its own implication in the problem. It aims to return the reader to his or her senses, as Thoreau put it in his essay ‘Walking’, by employing captured moments of deep listening, of immersion in the wild or of animal encounter, and integrating those with moments of enlightenment, like the ‘spots of time’ that Wordsworth experienced. These contemporary ‘lit spaces’ as John Burnside has called them, do the work of poetry, translating experience into something which is engaged, provoking, alert, fluid and resonant with crisis.
The continuing question raised by this thesis is how this potent combination of environmental awareness and sensory response will be enough to achieve actual change?

Spearheading a response to this concern, Kathleen Jamie engages with imaginative and perceptual failures addressing the way we think about the environment, and asks ‘what it is that we are just not seeing?’ (Sightlines, 37). In parallel to this, ecoseismology investigates what is it that we are not hearing. The challenge of both questions is how to reach, enlighten and affect a wider audience; how this is beginning to happen will be discussed from here and in the conclusion.

The challenge of adequately perceiving the aural soundscape is vast. Embedded in a hugely different sonic environment to our forbears of even one hundred years ago, we nevertheless are programmed still to respond to sound, story and song. The motivation of ecoseismology is to engage readers by positioning itself in the aural zone where the ecology of connections might be being generally drowned out or is breaking down, in that zone where we are ‘not seeing’ and not hearing: Ecoseismology uses the human ear as the starting point, as a passageway to emotional response. Ecoseismology aims to listen into the seismic rift of deafness, the unheard zones where language and the melody of our surroundings could be lifted out and used as an alchemical concoction that could be employed to penetrate the ear and create an internal response. Ecoseismic writing aims to use its own remedy, a rendering which is a kind of ‘soundful storying’ a poetic telling or rendering which is designed to enter the ear, break down the silt of interference, and reduce human indifference and detachment. Familiar things like local fauna and flora are being harnessed and used to draw our attention and astonishment, and never fail to provoke a reaction. As David Quammen says: ‘They were part of the ecological matrix within which Homo sapiens evolved. They were part of the psychological context in which our sense of identity as a species arose. They were part of the spiritual systems that we invented for coping.’ (Monster of God, 3). If change may be achieved in a contemporary world of increasing ecological uncertainty, where the threat of mass extinction and destabilising climate change looms, the engagement of deeper listening to this wider community of wildlife using soundful storying may be a start to what is needed.
The approach of ecoseismology, embedded within soundful storying, enters the commonly perceived rift between the human and the non-human, and attempts a reintegration. Ecoseismology rises during a time when ‘listening’ to the natural world is particularly challenging. There is rarely a ‘hush’ where one can listen and pay attention clearly to what is nearby or to the internal workings of one’s own body and emotions. The sonic environment is full of interference and distractions, which makes mental stillness and paying attention to the ‘quieter’ aspects of the world difficult. If we are ‘out’ of our senses, plugged into an earpiece or otherwise distracted, how can we pay attention or give sympathy to what is around us? Ecoseismology mines readers’ understanding and sympathies by employing a sonorous language and poetic technique that creates some revelatory anecdotal moments and draws reverberations to the surface of the mind.

This calling of attention to detail and to provoking truths by ‘speaking to the heart’ through the ear as well as the senses and the mind is characterised by a refusal to be didactic. Like much oral storytelling and contemporary poetry, the messages may be left open, but provoke or engage thought, so are fluid in effect. Pathways may be glimpsed mentally or emotionally as oblique portals that throw light on an issue, but the soundful storying of ecoseismic writing does not necessarily spell out solutions to issues raised. Is such a literary approach with its gentle, aural, poetic, anti-didactic ethos is sufficient to effect any real social or moral change in a time of crisis where change appears to be urgently needed? It is impossible to measure the effects of the writings being produced, but one thing that is noticeable is that the use of ecoseismology is spreading. The particular alertness to sound that ecoseismic writing embodies is being taken up within other media, as if, beginning with poetry, the ‘song’ emanating from the earth is being heard. Although Timothy Morton in *The Ecological Thought* has claimed that nature writing can be positioned too deeply in stereotypical ideas of nature to be of any use, recent ecoseismic writing has at least attempted to have a useful effect, and as Burnside has suggested in his essay ‘Strong Words’, writing itself can be an ecological and a political act and as such can be transformative.

New writings aiming for such transformation are springing from a recently formed group of writers and practitioners in the New Networks for Nature, detailed below. As well as the literary focus, attention has been brought to soundscapes-in-
themselves which are springing up on radio programmes, for example sound recordist Chris Watson’s extraordinary diffusions of his natural soundscapes of the land, of birdsong, of underwater whale song, and of wind, land and coastal soundscapes of parts of the British Isles. Sound is in vogue! In 2013 from BBC Radio 4, came a 30 part documentary *Noise, A Human History of Sound and Listening*, which concluded with an episode in April 2013 lamenting the overwhelming noise of modern life. The concluding episode, ‘The Search for Silence’ concentrated on recordings of natural, animal and indigenous sounds that have been drowned out. This would indicate (as with the wild otter) that the things human beings feel they are losing, or are lost, can suddenly and at the final hour focus intense attention and concern to listen to and to preserve what may be being lost.

The research continues; the focus on listening seems to be intensifying still. David Attenborough is about to launch a radio series of ‘My Life in Sound’ (it remains to be heard what ecological concerns he will reveal but it I predict it will encompass some concern for sonic aspects of the planet’s losses). Monty Don’s next BBC Radio 4 programme ‘Shared Planet’ entitled ‘Noise in the Natural World’ will focus entirely on raising the question of how far human-produced noise pollution removes us from the natural world and BBC Radio Four’s most visited site is the birdsong spot ‘Tweet of the Day’ which has been so popular that it has been moved to later in the day (from 6am) by popular demand so that more people can enjoy it. National Poet of Wales Gillian Clarke recently interviewed on Desert Island Discs chose her tracks as choral voices embodying the sounds of the sea and the landscape near her home instead of the usual records. Her one favourite track to take to her island was the song of the blackbird.

These interesting and pertinent approaches to listening and to natural soundscape from the wider media indicate increasing interest in sonority and listening as a primary sympathetic response to the environment. It cannot be a coincidence that the internal, resonant, sonorous, connective nature of listening primordial to poetry has leaked into and appeared in the technique of writings expressed by some of the contemporary writers already discussed. It has also spread to a group closely bonded in terms of their allegiance to nature conservation: Mark Cocker, Paul Evans, Tim Dee, Richard Mabey, and pertinently, BBC Springwatch producer Stephen Moss, among others, in 2009 set
up and now regularly attend and speak at their New Networks for Nature conference whose ethos stipulates their concerns:

**New Networks for Nature** is a broad alliance of creators (including poets, authors, scientists, film makers, visual artists, environmentalists, musicians and composers) whose work draws strongly on the natural environment.

Its formation grew out of dissatisfaction with the low political priority placed upon nature in the UK. Today our wildlife and landscapes are so often evaluated exclusively in environmental scientific terms when, in fact, they are a resource at the very heart of human creativity. (By this we imply no criticism of the key role played by science in understanding our environment. It is the notion of scientific exclusivity that we seek to challenge).

(www.newnetworksfornature.org.uk)

Although this bland statement of ethos does state the ‘low political priority placed on nature’ and expresses dissatisfaction in the evaluation of it as weighted ‘in scientific environmental terms’ this belies a passionate and active, campaigning concern with conservation and the nature of nature writing. With this gathering some of the group have bound themselves together in terms of active literary allegiance (not all of them might agree about ‘allegiance,’ but they seem to be working towards similar ends) and have increasingly attracted other, like minded writers and poets, where ecopoetry, environmentally aware writings and creativity is highly valued. Not only is poetry a strong influence, song and music form an important part of each gathering. Robert Macfarlane, whose writing is in sympathy with the group and is respected by them but due to his high status in the academic and publishing world or for reasons known only to themselves, (perhaps he is considered too conservative), has not joined or been taken into this new ‘fold.’ It will be suggested shortly however why he could be included in the category of ecoseismic writers.
The last writers I will look at are those who are now producing ongoing work that fits securely into the ecoseismology category, but they are working at the forefront of the media, publishing articles in the Guardian newspaper, particularly the Guardian Country Diary. The conclusion of this thesis will remain open, as this is research that continues: I will now ‘conclude’ by setting out what it is that particularly binds the most recent developing and cutting edge writings in terms of ecoseismic method.
Conclusion: Writing into new forms: the directions of ecoseismology.

Richard Kerridge’s request for new forms of writing at the Writing the New Nature Symposium in July 2012 is part of an address to the current period of ecological crisis and ecoseismology is one response to that call. Such campaigns are nothing new, but ecoseismology distinguishes itself as a movement in its use of poetic resonance, sonority and listening and in its context of crisis. It is sensitised writing, which has its ear to the ground, to its roots and to the future. In a series of radio essays ‘Before Silent Spring’ in October 2010, five writers examined the birth of environmental consciousness before the publication of Rachel Carson’s seismic book. Richard Mabey, one of my founding ecoseismic writers, suggested in his essay that John Clare, as an ‘ecological minstrel’ used his poetry as a campaigning mouthpiece to bring readers and listeners to closer sympathy with and understanding of the natural world and its losses. Clare’s poems map the wild community around his home and create songlines that sing his world into the attentions of wider communities. Mabey argues in his essay how in the nineteenth century Clare’s campaign prefigured Carson’s and used a particular method in order to attract sympathy to the natural world around him. Clare’s method was one of perspective often shifted down to ground-level. From here Clare used the sonority of his vernacular language to list, record and sing about the charm and intricacy of the closely-integrated fauna and flora in his known and loved places. He listens carefully to the language of birds (while Carson a century later hears them fall silent). Mabey finishes his essay by concluding that of the many things Clare’s writing still teaches, one of them is that language may be ‘our greatest ecological gift, and that the answer to the threat of a silent spring is for us to sing against the storm.’ Is that ‘singing against the storm’ perhaps partly what Richard Kerridge was envisioning at the symposium in 2012? Has Mabey identified the one of the early fathers of ecoseismology? Clare’s poetry is very dear to the hearts of many of the writers at New Networks for Nature, (in fact at the meeting in 2011 they made a pilgrimage to his home and his grave at Helpstone), and his increased popularity and influence is reaching out of his time and into our own. Could prose writing be expected to ‘sing’ the land in the way that Clare did, to shift our persepctives, as the poet Clare attempted to do, but with
a new clarity of alertness to the current crisis, and with more prominent voices? If this is so, what contemporary forms the song could take will be dealt with next.

Since Ring of Bright Water an understanding of a more integrated web of ecological interdependency and our place in it has put an end to certain aspects of nostalgia and human arrogance in writings about nature. Multiple perspectives have emerged. Employed by poets and writers like Oswald, Clarke, Jamie, Morton, and Burnside, new ecocentric writings are attempting to shift perspective to more interrogating, questioning, ecosensitive and responsible ways forward in terms of ethical change in an ecologically uncertain future.

Ecoseismology offers a soundful approach which has been gathering intensity since 2012 and attempts to integrate words, soundscape and the emotions to catalyse change. Sara Maitland has written a recent essay which expresses the idea of this approach in her essay in Aeon Magazine, ‘Whispering Giants’, where she concentrates on how listening can be a primary sense that connects directly to the emotions. Distressed by the drowning sounds of new wind turbines near her home, Maitland engages the ear to connect the sense of hearing to feeling for a place and its soundscape of inhabitants. While she laments the appearance of wind turbines in the open moorland, she identifies an issue that might be a problem for ecoseismology. Maitland suggests that although wind turbines seem to be an act of desecration, they are at the same time ‘good and just’ because they are ‘clean’ energy. Maitland asks if the problem is a failure of imagination; she suggests that in the case of wind turbines it is a challenge to hold these two ideas – of desecration and clean energy – simultaneously in mind because most people are ‘hooked’ on the visual aesthetic of ‘landscape’. Maitland’s essay further suggests that what might be more helpful is for us to imagine the value in soundscape of place, thus releasing ourselves from the ‘visual’ addiction to outdated ideas of what is picturesque or pleasing to the eye, and concentrating more on close listening to the detail of what actually survives in the land, alerting ourselves to what speaks from it, and what that shows about the surviving ecologies of place. Maitland points out that because the visual aesthetic of landscape has been the dominant one there does not exist a widely used language to encompass and value the natural soundscapes of place. The question remains as to whether ecoseismology is part of a
rising language of soundscape, or whether it still is not enough to draw wide enough attention to effect change.

Recent attention to this kind of listening perspective raises the profile of soundscapes and their implied ecologies; sound expressed in prose appears to be in increasingly in vogue, and has been appearing more frequently in the widely read Guardian Country Diary. A series of diaries from environmentally-minded writers Paul Evans and Mark Cocker appear to have intensified their own kind of soundful storying in response to ecological crisis. Both acutely alert to the deterioration of bird populations and the degradation of habitats, Cocker and Evans’s writings echo these concerns: what they hear and experience leaves their prose acutely focussed on sound and redolent with poetic sound effects and as if with sympathetic resonance the writings vibrate with soundfulness from the wild.

Using the ear and soundful storying to suggest how the land might affect us, this group of writers, which includes Robert Macfarlane, appear to be using many of the techniques of poetry but in the medium of more widely read prose, so that their sensitive lyrics are left ringing in more ears than poetry might usually reach. Below, Macfarlane discusses a permanent exhibition in the Victoria and Albert Museum of Constable’s depictions of elm trees. Macfarlane’s approach to writing about the Constable paintings is what is interesting. He has taken on a distinctive ‘Hopkins-eque’ style which evokes and resounds with poetic technique. Gerard Manley Hopkins’s use of the compacted sonority and crossings-over of verbs and adjectives, and his alliterative, musical techniques appear in Macfarlane’s sympathetic description which appears to attempt a sonorous capturing of the both Hopkins’s style and the ‘this-ness’ of the trees:

the shady green-gold leaf-dropped damp circle beneath the first boughs, […] the canopy-world of their branches […] the visual effects of elmyness: light falling through its dark leaves, to form luminous dapplings and reticulations. […] the trunk of elms, the meeting of trunk and earth, the rough mazy mappish underworld of bark and root flare. […] Bark is a subtle, supple substance, easily overlooked. […] Lean in close to bark, and you will find a
landscape which you might enter,[…] you would be able to see it moving, working, living: crevasses gapping, callouses forming […] (Memory Maps: ‘Elm’)

Here the trained geographer’s eye gives a textured soundscape blended by delightfully musical uses of alliteration and imaginatively placed adjectives and compound words reminiscent in its sonority of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: ‘shady green-gold leaf-dropped damp circle’; ‘rough, mazy mappish underworld’; ‘bark is a subtle, supple substance’ ‘crevasses gapping, callouses forming’. The effect is to ‘rinse and wring the ear’ as in Hopkins’s poem ‘Spring’, and to leave the reader vibrating with the recreation of a Hopkins-esque inscape of the elm and also to raise awareness about its loss from the land. The reader has been attuned to the elm trees with the distinctly poetic, extreme close-up, tactile, sensory approach where a wider landscape view is destabilized and shifted into a pleasurably distorted other-world of tree bark and treesscape. This is pure ‘soundful storying’ where the piece engages us with the textures of the tree and ends with a melancholy lament for the loss of the tree. The writing as well as the tree becomes more affecting through being ‘a landscape which you might enter’ where sound and exquisite choice of image create a sympathetic resonance, effectively producing the internal ‘ecoseismic’ response required.

Macfarlane is far from alone in his attraction to using the poetic effects of soundscapes in prose. Paul Evans uses the same technique of poetry in his own soundful storying in his Country Diary bird descriptions:

It begins with the cough and growl of a raven above the brook. Rancorous wrens bolt from ivy holes to zigzag across lanes. Gangs of redwings go scrumping through trees. Buzzards ditch the plaintive to sound fearsome firework screams. (Country Diary 12 Nov 2013)

Evans’ prose is audibly effortful in its densely packed sound-imagery and brightly coloured evocations as it goes on: ‘Redder than remembrance poppies, riper than a bunch of tomatoes, […] the hedge is swagged in black bryony berries.’ Containing all
the simile and alliteration of poetry, and the unusual metaphorical use of the verb ‘swagged’, brings the prose even closer to being shaped into a poem, and rather than just being an artefact for language in-itself, an ecoseismic effect seems to be woven in. The piece continues to concentrate on the soundscape produced by discontented voices of innumerable birds until the final line: ‘In some strange way this movement is the fragment of a song, a bite, a flash – an inspired act of insurgence.’

The final suggestion of an anthropomorphic act of ‘insurgence’, an implicit rebellion by the ‘rancorous’ birds, presumably to the destructive indifference of a materialist age moves the writing securely into the political sphere, and settles into the Country Diary’s serious work of restoring readers to their senses.

Evans is not alone in his efforts: Mark Cocker also repeatedly uses ear-close and highly poetic soundfulness in his Country Diaries, demonstrated here in ‘The delicious snick of a red admiral’s wings’:

[…] All along the hedge I could hear the indeterminate and random susurration of foliage interacting with the leg and body movements of the wasps, bluebottles and ichneumons that swarmed upon it. Then there was the delicious quiet snick of a red admiral's wings […] It gradually dawned that there was a sparse autumn music; one needed simply to adjust to its subtle register. […] Words are so ill-fitted to capture this fey music, […] as if the entire drift of autumn colours were being lightly spun and there entwined in all that air and sunlight is a recurrent thread of melancholy.’ (Country Diary, 27 October 2013)

These attempts to produce a kind of rhythmic, sonorous alert, a sympathetic resonance within the reader, where sound is the key to producing reverberations in an echoed internal, emotional response is used as a subtle cue to open the imagination and envision crisis. Just as in *Otter Country*, these short diaries’ method is to harness the ear and use it to attempt to go beyond visual surfaces into a seismic moment of recognition. These ecoseismic writers are invoking the aural textures and techniques of poetry and in this way aim penetrate the emotions and ‘sing into the storm’. With *Otter Country* the sonic habitat of the wild otter is evoked, and even the animal itself opened up, to
reveal an emotional perspective on the connective tissue of kinship produced by witnessing the internal ecology of the animal; the bark of a tree is expanded to suggest integration in the earth-body connections, or intense bird and insect soundscapes demonstrate a connective tissue of sound that penetrate the emotions via the ears. This approach of reconfiguring the visual way we speak of nature in order to encourage deep listening to ecological crisis enters the human imagination by integrating natural soundscapes and rhythms with the emotions.

With the Guardian Country Diaries’ demonstrable drive to work upon the ear; with David Attenborough’s new series ‘My Life in Sound’; with the poetic, sonic interludes that have crept into nature writing prose and into increasingly sympathetic, lyrical film shorts in BBC Springwatch; with Chris Watson’s acutely sensitive sound recordings of natural soundscapes and Sara Maitland’s call to a re-valuing of sound in landscape, ecoseismology is entering the mainstream. A new vocabulary of listening is emerging, as if poetry is coupling itself with technological advances in scientific research. What reverberations it may provoke next could be the subject of further study.
Bibliography


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