

Five Modes of 'Listening Deeply' to Pastoral Sounds

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Is existentialism a theory of contingency that ecocriticism has neglected? If I accept an invitation to reflect upon 'pastoral sounds' in a public utterance six months hence, my life has been subtly changed.¹ Ecocriticism has offered me the practice and precedent of *narrative scholarship* to chart my reading, thinking and living in those months on the assumption that all scholarship is taking place embedded in a lived existential context that feeds into the understanding that hopefully becomes shared published scholarship. The five modes of engagement with pastoral sounds that I reflect upon here are not, of course, the only five, or even the first five, but the dominant five that my six months produced in a life of reading, listening, book reviewing and travelling that were gifted to me by contingency. Inevitably I process these five encounters with pastoral sounds through my personal frames. Are each of these modes really distinct from each other? I take a subjective existential view in my use of the term 'modes' here, which is to say that they were experienced as distinct modes of listening at the time, although I am quite prepared for readers of my reports of them in what follows to take a different view. I apologise for briefly repeating the frames of my take on the pastoral and post-pastoral in British ecocriticism here. I do so for clarification and invitation – an opportunity for clarification of the original terms and an invitation for future scholars to develop these ideas that now apparently linger as *passé* in English ecocriticism. I happen to now live in Somerset surrounded by pastoral sounds which material ecocriticism encourages me to think wrong to exclude from this reflection. If the agency of land means anything it is present in the complex and contradictory sounds of the contemporary 'pastoral' English countryside in which this essay is written. Indeed, as ever, further discussion will only serve to confirm the elusive and elastic nature of the category of 'pastoral' itself.

Living Pastoral?

I want to begin with the sound of the English harvest horn. From feudal times, when the whole village would work to get in the estate's harvest, they would be woken by the sound of the harvest horn passing through the streets, part functional, part ceremonial in the way that the seasons in village life used to interfuse the two. A harvest song collected by George Butterworth in Pulham, Norfolk, in 1911 refers to this practice. Is this song, which was revived by the Watsons on their 1965 album *Frost and Fire*, the lived voice of pastoral?

We gets up in the morn
And we sound the harvest horn
Our master his harvest for to mind.
First thing we take in hand
Is the stopper from the can
So each man may drink until the bottom he find.
Then each man must take his
And work with hand and heart
While the glorious sun do shine, do shine,
While the glorious sun do shine.

Here's the master bring the can
He's a jolly hearted man
'Come me lads and take a drop of the best.
But don't you stand and prattle
When you hear the wagons rattle,
For the sun he is aturning to the west, to the west,
For the sun he is aturning to the west.'

Here's the farmer's daughter dear
Brews us plenty of strong beer
Which is enough to cheer up any soul
So each man may drink and say,
'Heaven bless this happy day
When we crown the harvest with a flowing bowl, flowing bowl,
When we crown the harvest with a flowing bowl'. (Roud Folk Song Index 2471)

This would have been sung at Harvest Supper and Harvest Home in England at the time before mechanised harvesters. 'The end of the harvest in England was usually celebrated in the last week of August with church wakes, public entertainment and enthusiastic drinking' (Groom 2013, 208).

If the weather was kind, the harvest could begin at the end of July in time for the "loaf-mass" of St Peter ad Vincula (St Peter in Chains, 1st August) – the blessing of the bread made from the new corn. Lammas derives from Anglo-Saxon for "loaf-kneader" and superseded the Celtic festival celebrating the victory of the sun god over the god of the earth. (Groom 2013, 204)

Groom also added a reference to a Frolic: 'Harvest Home was the end of the annual agricultural cycle and marked by more celebrations such as the Harvest Frolic in the west of England' (Groom 2013, 206).

Of course, this song has a twentieth century presence as a result of the 1960s folk song revival. Here is Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* on 'folksong' in the context of what he calls 'the damage which can never be forgotten': 'There was the abstract and limiting definition of "folksong", which in Cecil Sharp was based on the full rural myth of the "remnants" of the "peasantry"' (Williams 1973, 309). Williams is associating song collecting with the Georgian poets - that is with endorsing the pastoral myth of a pre-industrial Golden Age. Williams extends his critique of country singers as represented by Sharp's collection of 'folksongs' to the later memoirs of rural workers such as wheelwrights and ploughmen whom he calls 'country writers': 'Very few country writers, in the twentieth century, have wholly escaped this strange formation in which observation, myth, record and half-history are so deeply entwined' (Williams 1973, 313). The problem with Williams' position is that it leaves no possibility for an unidealised consideration of pre-industrial rural conditions - recognising the long hours, tough work and poverty as well as the humour and fun of seasonal feast days charted by Groom (2013) – in which these songs were, nevertheless, actually sung. Where is Williams' alternative account of rural folk song? On such pastoral sounds Williams is silent.²

But are the harvest singers of this song pastoralising themselves, or ironising themselves? If this is a communal song for the solidarity of the workforce, or rather the whole village, at a Harvest Home, isn't it a shared joke that the whole harvest was just one rehydrating drink after another, since everyone singing the song knows the real sweat that the

harvest has actually cost? We really don't need Derrida to explain that the irony works through the shared audience knowledge of what is absent in the song. So is this a pastoral or a georgic text? Is this actually a representative of 'the harvester's hymn' of Virgil's *Georgics* Book I (Virgil 2009, 63)? The folklorist A. L. Lloyd points out that this tune 'is a variant of one of the most-used melodies for Maytime and Christmas carols and other ceremonial songs' (Lloyd 1965, n.p.). In a conspicuous lacuna there are only three references to *The Georgics* in *The Country and the City*. Yet this song is the actual voice of what Raymond Williams calls elsewhere in his book 'the invisible farm labourer' in English pastoral texts, here singing a text in which they knowingly pastoralise themselves. Does the placing of inverted commas around 'folksong' by Williams patronise and simplify the mode so that its occasional ironies are obscured? Perhaps it is time that Williams' deconstruction in *The Country and the City* of a rather narrow part of the English pastoral tradition that has been so influential in the rejection of pastoral in British ecocriticism, is itself subjected to contextual deconstruction. But isn't this song actually a georgic text, the humour of which can only be fully understood in relation to a major job of hard work? Have we ecocritics, following Williams, thrown out the georgic with the pastoral? Have we been neglecting georgic sounds that originate in the complex and connected sounds of Virgil's *Georgics*?

Living Georgics?

Then a crow, strutting the deserted shore, proclaims in its mean caw, Rain, rain, and then more rain.

In truth, even in the dark of night, young women busy carding wool, can foretell a storm's approach: they notice in their lighted lamps a sputtering, and watch spent wicks begin to clot and harden (Fallon 2004, 30).

The movement of sound from 'caw to 'sputtering', from outdoor natural sound to interior domestic sound is indicative of the connectedness of Virgil's rural knowledge, just as natural sounds of discord connect with times when 'scythes and sickles have been hammered into weapons of war' (Fallon 2004, 35).

In the Mendip village of Stoke St Michael where I live in Somerset, I hear from my house the birth cries of cows belonging to my farmer neighbour and the industrial siren from the limestone quarry that is actually carrying the countryside away outside the village. Other rural neighbours work digitally from home several days a week. The silence of their work is part of the post-pastoral reality of sounds in the English countryside now. As Glen Love points out in relation to contemporary experience of pastoral and its traditional call to 'Come away' - 'There is no away' (Love 2003, 67). But although he appears to do most of his work from his tractor cab, my farmer neighbour still plans his daily work around listening to the signs of weather and the sound of popping seed heads and the ground underfoot to make crucial agricultural decisions. English farmers still need to stay attentive to such signs and can mix talk of weather with politics as much as Virgil's farmers in *The Georgics*. So why has British ecocriticism failed to recognise and assess, for example, a literary narrative that is driven by the search for a missing cow in calf on a Welsh farm in Cynan Jones' *The Long Dry* (2006)? Here is a novel, based upon the author's grandfather's taped memoir of farming in Wales, which is poignant with pastoral sounds that are embedded in the emotional and practical textures of the georgic. This does not in itself, of course, render the novel worthy of critical attention, but its sensitive attention to the tensions in family relationships as related to, and to some extent caused by, the anxieties about working with the land and the animals is quietly achieved in a subtle narrative form. Literary georgic is alive in Britain in novels such

as this, just as it is in the Poetry of Ted Hughes's *Moortown Diary* (1989) or the contemporary memoir of Janes Rebanks' *A Shepherd's Life* (2015).

Dead Pastoral?

Of course, as a result of a combination of Leavis's attack on Georgian poetry in his 1932 book *New Bearings in English Poetry* and, most devastatingly and decisively, Raymond Williams's attack on the English pastoral tradition more widely in his influential book *The Country and the City* (1973), the pastoral is apparently dead in England. The deception of pastoral's tendency to the idealisation of nature, its historical unreliability in its representation of landscape, and its view of the English countryside in a cultural class function in Williams' analysis in his influential book, predisposed the current generation of the English ecocritics to dismiss as an 'outmoded model'. Greg Garrard in the 'Pastoral' chapter of his book *Ecocriticism* (2011) suggests that the long and complex pastoral tradition has been, and still is in 'popular pastoral ecology', 'wedded to outmoded models of harmony and balance' (Garrard 2011, 65). This simplistic view is endorsed by, amongst others, Ursula Heise in her influential book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (Heise 2008, 64).

It is necessary to say 'English ecocritics' rather than 'British' because in Ireland there has recently been a revived interest in a continuing Irish pastoral literary tradition in the work of Oona Frawley (*Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, 2005), Tim Wenzell (*Emerald Green: An Ecocritical Study of Irish Literature*, 2009) and Donna Potts (*Contemporary Irish Poetry and the Pastoral Tradition*, 2011). Seamus Heaney published a late essay subtitled 'On the Staying Power of Pastoral' (2003). The recent book edited by Robert Brazeau and Derek Gladwin *Eco-Joyce: The Environmental Imagination of James Joyce* (2014) contains three essays that refer to Joyce's engagement with an overlap of the country and the city, an Irish pastoral tradition and an urban experience. Of course, in the USA there has also been a sense of a distinctively American continuity of pastoral. American ecocritic Lawrence Buell asserts, 'pastoralism is a species of cultural equipment that western thought has for more than two millennia been unable to do without' (Buell 1995, 32), such that the current ecological crisis, in the words of the Americanist Leo Marx, 'is bound to bring forth new versions of pastoral' (Marx 1992, 222). Echoing Marx and Buell, and quoting Heaney, Todd Borlik ends his recent book, *Ecocriticism and Early Modern Literature* (2011), with the words, 'The pastoral's "staying power", its adaptability, is precisely what we need' (Borlik 2011, 209).

Post-Pastoral?

In 1994 I published an essay titled 'Gods of Mud: Ted Hughes and the Post-Pastoral' in which I first identified the six questions that I observed to be raised for the reader by post-pastoral texts, to be elaborated in relation to poetry in the final chapter of *Green Voices* (Gifford 2nd edn 2011) and more generally expanded upon in the 'Post-Pastoral' chapter of *Pastoral* (Gifford 1999, 146-174).

There have been some misunderstandings of the term 'post-pastoral' as I conceived it. The 'post-pastoral' is unlike terms like 'postmodernism', 'postcolonialism', or 'posthumanism'. 'Post-' here does not mean 'after', but 'reaching beyond' the limitations of pastoral while being recognizably in the pastoral tradition. It is not temporal but conceptual, and therefore can refer to a work in any time period. This is often misunderstood by ecocritics taking up the notion for new applications in their own work, resulting in some reduction of post-pastoral's more nuanced critical potential. It is not 'intended to show how the reading and writing of rural retreat must now be tempered with an awareness of ecological threat' (Matthewman 2011, 31). Obviously only contemporary work can be post-pastoral in this way, although Ken Hiltner's work in *What Else is Pastoral?* (2011) on anxiety

about urban pollution, marsh drainage and deforestation in Renaissance literature suggests otherwise. Nor does it only 'describe works in which the retreat serves to prompt the reader to the urgent need for responsibility and action on behalf of the environment' (Potts 2011, x), although this may be the case when applied to some contemporary Irish poetry.

The post-pastoral is really best used to describe works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved. It is more about connection than the disconnections essential to the pastoral. The post-pastoral does not so much transcend the problematics of the pastoral but explore them, seeking not a stable, complacent form of harmony in the human relationship with nature – our species' relationship with its home planet in its macro and its micro ecologies – but seeks a dynamic, self-adjusting accommodation to 'discordant harmonies' in Daniel Botkin's resonant phrase (Botkin 1992). To the extent that the positions taken in post-pastoral texts are provisional and open to revision, even at their most provocative and strategically didactic, they might be characterised as postmodern. But the deferral of judgments of the postmodern is not an option for ecocritics in that judgments are being acted upon daily in relation to the environment by our current 'best guesses' for courses of action. At its best post-pastoral literature enacts this dynamic relationship and explores its problematics.

Five modes of 'listening deeply'

1. Self-ironic listening mode

There is a danger that the six questions raised by post-pastoral might be used as a kind of check-list for approved texts, but it is important to realise that a single writer, or indeed a single text, might shift between all three modes of pastoral, anti-pastoral and post-pastoral, as Marvell does to deepening effect in the philosophical journey of 'The Garden'. Or, in relation to pastoral sounds, as Bob Dylan does in the song 'Highlands', a song of blatant escapism from the 'unreality' of the 'rat race'.

Actually the song begins with a test of character that has echoes of Cormac McCarthy: 'Good enough to go'? Aberdeen waters are flowing elsewhere and the rhyme of 'flow' with 'go' is actually a disjunction because the singer admits that, as yet, he's not 'good enough to go'. Is that morally, or spiritually, or emotionally, or psychologically? Do we need Lacan here? Is his self-analysis that of a disjunction between the Symbolic and Real (see Lacan 1998)? The story within the story at the centre of the song concerning the sketching of the waitress in Boston is certainly about the disjunction between the Symbolic and Real. But is Dylan's sense of the Scottish Highlands real?³

This song would not have been played in the recent Scottish referendum campaign. It has to be said that Bob Dylan's perception of Highland culture is rather confused here. Images of quintessential English ruralism ('with the horses and hounds') have found their way into the Highlands and there's a distinctly London view of where the Highlands is actually located. 'Way up in the border country'? If Dylan can't 'see any other way to go' he'll not arrive in the Highlands. Perhaps pastoral escapism is its own self-fulfilling reward. However, with Dylanesque self-awareness elsewhere in the song he admits 'Well, I'm lost somewhere, I must have made a few bad turns'. By the end of the song does Dylan confess a kind of cognitive dissonance. So is this a sixteen minutes and thirty seconds long expression of satisfaction with absence, with a failure to achieve *jouissance*, or an ironic post-pastoral self-awareness of the temptation, the attraction, the ultimate disillusion of pastoral?

'Well, I'm already there in my mind, and that's good enough for now'? Who is he kidding? Well not himself, I think. And figuring out how to get there is more than a matter of logistics. There's a way to get there that needs a deeper kind of figuring out than the song's easy sixteen minutes and thirty seconds flow might suggest. I'm not sure even Lacan might

be able to figure it out for the complicated heart and mind of Bob Dylan. Might it involve ‘listening deeply to the source’?

I seem to have arrived at my title at last, which also engages with a complex post-pastoral challenge arising out of an apparent escapist pastoral. In his version of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, Ted Hughes’s *Tales from Ovid* presents a kind of post-Darwinian creation narrative of the Fall which begins, as it must, with the Golden Age. What might easily be dismissed as pastoral idealisation, I’d suggest is actually a post-pastoral invitation:

And the first age was Gold,
Without laws, without law’s enforcers,
This age understood and obeyed
What had created it.
Listening deeply, man kept faith with the source. (Hughes 2006, 869)

What does this mean? What mode of listening can achieve this and how would we recognise it? There are plenty of pastoral sounds around us, and I will be getting around to considering some, but it seems to me that it is our mode of listening that is our urgent environmental challenge. If a post-pastoral mode of listening is aware of idealisation, as it is of class, postcolonial, political and gender frames how do we know when we are ‘keeping faith with the source’, understanding what has created us, what actually is ‘being good enough’, what is an ethical, sustainable ‘way to go’ in the ecological creation in which we daily act? How, as critics, animals, writers, walkers and thinkers do we know what is ‘listening deeply’ or listening deludedly?

2. Post-pastoral listening mode

This invitation to listen again alertly to pastoral sounds has resulted in my feeling that Raymond Williams may have closed my ears, as he obviously has for most other English ecocritics, to the continuing pastoral tradition in some fundamental aspects. I was listening to Bob Dylan singing ‘Highlands’ in a room in a mountain village in Spain with the windows open at dusk. From the poplars at the watermill below the village there arose another song. It was so strong and mesmerising and complicated that I turned off Dylan. I sat and listened, I like to think, deeply. I was, at any rate, deeply moved. Poems come into my head and flow out of my fingers in that room. Sometimes they have been poems inspired by natural sounds. But I could not possibly begin to consider writing a poem about this song because it was that of a nightingale. Of course, for the English poet there is the deafening sound of Keats in his ears whose linguistic exploration of what E. O. Wilson would call ‘biophilia’ is intimidating – the way ‘here, where men sit and hear each other groan’ can be supplanted by a different kind of listening – not transported by the indulgences of the pastoral myth (‘Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards’), but by the hard work of a listening language (‘the viewless wings of Poesy’) (‘Ode to a Nightingale’, Keats 1970, 207). So, says Keats, ‘Darkling, I listen’. So, cut the visuals, upon which the poet is so dependent for imagery, cut the temptations of self-indulgent melancholy, cut the self-absorption in which ‘I have ears in vain - / To thy high requiem become a sod’, and listen to a timeless, classless, natural music that reconnects by breaking down boundaries leaving the poet in an unfamiliar state of vital animal nature at ease in himself and his environment, to express which he can only fall back on visual metaphors: ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: - do I wake or sleep?’

Here is a post-pastoral listening deeply explored by a poet who knows, as well as anyone, the temptations of pastoral sounds. But a single towering poem has not usually stopped the flow of the continuing poetic impulse in self-censorship. Something else is at work when the contemporary English poet says the word ‘nightingale’. As numbers have

declined it is, as Nick Groom says of the cuckoo, ‘on the cusp of becoming a metaphorical creature rather than a real bird’ (Groom 2013, 158) – that is a metaphor for pastoral, its Symbolic life overwhelming the Real. And this is the cultural force of Raymond Williams’ critique of pastoral. It is the reason why so many contemporary poets say in interviews that they do not want to be known as a nature poet. Thankfully ecopoetry has come to the rescue just in time to join them back up with the English tradition of pastoral poetry in a post-pastoral mode, as in Neil Astley’s Bloodaxe anthology *Earth Shattering* (2011). Has Raymond Williams stopped contemporary English poets from listening to the nightingale? Have we assumed that a pastoral idealisation – and only that falsification - is inevitable? Has the baby been thrown out with the bathwater? We should historicise the context and terms of Williams’s critique. Williams was a Marxist in the English faculty of Cambridge University required to teach the English country house literature of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His pre-ecocritical book was a critique of the cultural and agricultural falsifications of the English pastoral tradition of that period which sought out alternatives such as John Clare and Thomas Hardy. But I want to reclaim the possibility of listening deeply to the nightingale, of writing about it now, and of listening also to Keats’s post-pastoral exploration with all its honest self-awareness of the tensions in the delusions, depression, idealisation and reconnection.

3. Domestic listening mode

During my six months’ preoccupation with pastoral sounds I visited Coleridge’s cottage in the Quantock hills, sat in his garden under the lime tree bower, picked up a conveniently placed telephone, and heard a recording of his poem written here in 1797 titled ‘This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison’ (Coleridge 1985, 38). Was this recording a pastoral sound? The poem itself certainly had an anti-pastoral provenance. Coleridge’s wife had dropped scalding milk on his foot, preventing him going out for a walk with his friend Charles Lamb, to whom the poem is addressed. Coleridge, stuck in a domestic ‘prison’, imagines his friend up on the sublime, wild, Quantock hills, now in Nature after being ‘in the great city pent’, probably ‘silent with swimming sense’ after witnessing a glorious sunset ‘in the yellow light’. Here in the garden the pastoral sounds seem little compensation. They are, indeed, frankly inadequate: ‘the solitary humble bee / Sings in the bean-flower’ and the last ‘creeking’ rook goes ‘homewards’. But Coleridge reaches a kind of post-pastoral conclusion that endorses Wilson’s biophilia theory: ‘No sound is dissonant which tells of Life’. Even a garden prison and even its dissonant natural sounds endorse the connection of Coleridge’s inner organic life with the outer.

4. Anti-pastoral listening mode

This might seem miles away from the novels of Cormac McCarthy, as, indeed, it literally is. But there is in *All The Pretty Horses* (1992) a dissonant natural sound that tells not of ‘Life’ but of sickness, of disordered life, of the death process at an early stage. This passage is remarkable for adopting a horse’s perspective on a distinctly anti-pastoral sound coming from two humans:

They pulled the wet saddles off their horses and hobbled them and walked off in separate directions through the chaparral to stand spraddlelegged clutching their knees and vomiting. The browsing horses jerked their heads up. It was like no sound they’d ever heard before. In the grey twilight those retchings seemed to echo like the calls of some rude provisional species loosed upon that waste. Something imperfect and malformed lodged in the heart of being. A thing smirking deep in the eyes of grace itself like a gorgon in an autumn pool. (McCarthy 1992, 71)

Does such a sound render Coleridge's statement a pastoral delusion? A post-pastoral text must surely accept, even welcome, the death process as a necessary part of the cycle of life. But it is therefore not a dissonant sound in the larger scale of things, however much we must fight it individually to hang onto life. McCarthy is good at the larger scale of things, as when John Grady in the same novel hears the 'chord' of the universe in a centred, literally grounded, sense of connection with it:

They spread their soogans and he pulled off his boots and stood them beside him and stretched out in his blankets. The fire had burned to coals and he lay looking up at the stars in their places and the hot belt of matter that ran the chord of the dark vault overhead and he put his hands on the ground at either side of him and pressed them against the earth and in that coldly burning canopy of black he slowly turned dead centre to the world, all of it taut and trembling and moving enormous and alive under his hands. (McCarthy 1992, 119)

If the anti-pastoral listening mode dominates McCarty's fiction, there are, however, usually key moments of potential, and sometimes missed by the central characters, reconnection with the living universe, as in the silent 'whimpling' of the brooktrout at end of *The Road*. (McCarthy 2006, 241)

5. Dialogic listening mode

This universe is as alive under John Grady's hands as a horse, but it is without the dialogue he has with his horse which requires a mutual listening mode which ecocritics might now call 'biosemiotics'. This is a theory that develops, as its English proponent, Wendy Wheeler, puts it: 'from the assumption that all life – from the cell all the way up to us - is characterised by communication, or semiosis. This insight places humans back in nature as part of a richly communicative global web teeming with meanings and purposes, and which makes human culture, and thus technology, evolutionary and natural' (Wheeler 2011, 270). Wheeler's essay appears in Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby's *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches* (2011) in which the American ecocritic Patrick Murphy elaborates into the realm of ethics his latest reflections on Bakhtin's dialogics. He quotes Bakhtin: 'I myself cannot be the author of my own value [...] the biological life of an organism becomes a value only in another's sympathy and compassion with that life' (Murphy 2011, 158). Wendy Wheeler would say that Bakhtin's call for an engagement in 'responsive understanding' is actually what we do with our environment every day (see Wheeler 2006). This begs the question of the quality or effectiveness of both our understanding and our response, and how these are to be judged. Some cultures have evolved modes of listening in which ritual practices and place-based narratives and songs enact a kind of 'responsive understanding' to the sounds of nature. Can our Western technologies - our digital, reading, writing, singing practices – learn from other cultures?

So finally, I want to propose a dialogic mode of 'listening deeply to the source' that we might learn from indigenous people via anthropology, ecopsychology and communication studies. In the new book *Voice and Environmental Communication* edited by Jennifer Peoples and Stephen Depoe (2014), Yukari Kanisue writes of the Hawai'an people, 'Without knowledge of how to respect and maintain balance among all things that exist in the larger world, humans could not survive island life. Together with resources from land and ocean, wisdom pours into daily human life from all around the surroundings as long as he or she is listening deeply and attentively to nature's voice' (Kanisue 2014, 231). Hawai'ans have a number of daily practices that listen and communicate with their environment.

‘Communication takes the form of wider perceptions and sensations, not limited to verbal or visual cues. The paradox that humans have in communication is that verbalising about and of nature changes the very form of communication. In other words as soon as humans speak about nature it alienates humans from the material-physical reality of nonhuman nature’ (Kanisue 2014, 230-1).

In another essay in same book, Donal Carbaugh compares listening practices in Finland and Blackfeet country in Montana. He describes urban Finns making weekend retreats to a country cottage where in the stillness of a sauna ‘friends enjoy moments of silence together’ (Carbaugh 2014, 244) that they characterise as regenerative listening, ‘treating the world as an expressive partner’, as he puts it. Then Carbaugh points to the similarities with Blackfeet traditions: ‘As the Blackfeet story is told by the ancestral figure, Napi, people are advised, when having difficulties, to listen to the animals such as eagle, buffalo, or bear. These creatures can carry deep meanings that may speak constructively to one’s troubling circumstances, but one has to be focused in a good way to get the corrective message [...] And being ready means one listens also to agents in the world that are nonhuman’ (Carbaugh 2014, 245).

In Western culture one might cite David Rothenberg’s *Sudden Music: Improvisation, Sound, Nature* (2002) as typical of a philosopher-musician’s exploration of a dialogic practice. Rothenberg uses his clarinet to improvise a conversation with an appropriately named White-Crested Laughing Thrush playing itself, solo in the American National Aviary in Pittsburgh. Before dismissing this as the ultimate indulgence in pastoral sound - a matter of the aesthetics of the human ego rather than ‘listening deeply to the source’ - one needs to ask how seriously we take music as a biosemiological mode and how seriously birds take ‘music’. Rothenberg’s thesis is that birds’ musical system is, *pace* John Cage’s ‘it seems their musical system differs from ours’ (Cage 1980, 77), actually not so different from ours. ‘Birds sing for much more than simple communication’ (Rothenberg 2002, 195). So what are we to make of this observation by Paul Evans in *The Guardian Country Diary* for 22 October 2014? ‘A nuthatch hammers at a hazelnut in a hawthorn behind the maple. It sounds like dash-dot, dot-dot-dot-dash, dash: Morse code for “nut”’. Is this a moment of biosemiological enlightenment that we’ve all missed? But the big challenge of biosemiology is both and ecological and an ethical one. After listening deeply, how to speak, how to act? Donal Carbaugh quotes the Pawnee poet Anna Lee Walters remembering the advice of the elders:

Silence and speech at the water’s edge
alternated here

Remember we need both
we are told

(Carbaugh 2014, 245)

Notes

1. I am grateful for the invitation to give the keynote address, upon which this essay is based, at the ‘Pastoral Sounds’ conference at the University of Poitiers, France, 13-14 Nov 2014.
2. Although Williams’ main target here is Cecil Sharp’s supposed attitude towards folk song, it remains the case that he gives no serious attention to the songs or the singers themselves.
3. ‘They are not the Highlands [...] in any recognisably Scottish sense. (The chorus borrows its opening line from one of the lesser songs of Robert Burns, “Farewell to the Highlands”.)’ (Crotty 2003, 330).

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