The island imagination: an ecocritical study of ‘islandness’ in selected literature of the British and Irish archipelago

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Ecologically, we are all islanders now

–Baldacchino and Clark, 2013

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Catherine Bagguley, 28th November 1926 – 26th August 2015, and to Malta, Gozo and Comino, for their powers of islanding.

Wulf is on īege, ic on ōþerre

–'Wulf and Eadwacer'

Abstract

Taking its cue from Robert Pogue Harrison's exploration of the cultural meanings of forests in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), this thesis investigates the role of islands and islandness in the cultural imagination, focusing on a selection of post-1960 island-themed literary texts from four selected islands/island groups around the British and Irish archipelago. The study draws upon recent developments in island studies, cultural geography, archipelagic perspectives, and the emergent field of material ecocriticism, and addresses the following questions: What can an ecocritical reading of literary island writing contribute to an understanding of islandness? And reciprocally, in what ways can an understanding of islandness take ecocritical debate forward? The methodology brings the close reading techniques of literary criticism to bear on the texts, augmented, where possible, by interviews with the authors. The findings have confirmed Pete Hay's assertion, in the context of island studies, that islands are special, paradigmatic places: 'topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled' (2006: 31). The work of the island authors studied here reflects an apparent intensification of phenomenological experience, along with a disruption of established understandings of human being-in-the-world. The latter is exemplified in the thesis by discussion of concepts such as 'concurrent' island time and the 'more-than-metaphorical', and by its reframing of existing conceptualisations of dwelling. The physical qualities of islandness foster reflections on the intersections of the local and global, and offer visions of spatiotemporal scales that might assist in forging new means of apprehending the human place in planetary ecologies.

Material ecocriticism has provided a theoretical basis for the consideration of islands as 'naturecultures' and 'assemblages', and while this approach has proved richly productive, it has also revealed islands to be resistant to encapsulation, in ways that have cast both the tropes of islandness and these theoretical positions themselves into critical relief. The results of the study have suggested amendments to ecocritical theory that include: a need to balance a sense of the vibrant choreographies of material becoming with an exploration of more personal, culturally-inflected chorographies; the addition of the concepts of 'material affect' and 'material value' to material ecocritical readings; and the augmentation of ecocritical posthumanism by an ongoing study of the implications of human technicity. The research responds to reservations expressed within the field of island studies about literary portrayals of islandness, and argues that the works studied here represent important interventions into island literature. Their authors can be seen as introducing new, hybrid forms, such as 'pyscho-archipelagraphy', to the articulation of islandness, and as offering critical reflections upon earlier island texts while working towards their own, original responses. In sum, the thesis carries out both the islanding of ecocriticism and the introduction of ecocritical approaches to the field of island studies, and makes a case throughout the discussion for the ongoing relevance and value of the study of literary evocations of islandness to both island studies and ecocriticism.

Contents

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Some concepts and observations developed through the research undertaken for this thesis have been incorporated into, and expanded in, sole-authored published outputs:

The discussion of psycho-archipelagraphy in Chapter 1 shares some phrasing with and is expanded in 'The "Good Step" and Dwelling in Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran*: the Advent of *Psycho-archipelagraphy*' in *Ecozon@* 6 (1) 2015, pp. 7 – 24. http://www.ecozona.eu/index.php/journal/article/view/535/1097

The discussion of death in Chapter 2 shares some phrasing with and has been explored more extensively in '"Island of the Dead": composting twenty-thousand saints on Bardsey Island' in *Green Letters* 18 (1) 2014, pp. 78 – 90. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14688417.2014.891446

The section on 'material affect' in Chapter 3 shares some phrasing with and is developed further in '"Heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery": assemblages, ethics and affect in W. G. Sebald's Orford Ness', published in *Ecozon@* 5 (2) 2014, pp. 123 – 139. http://www.ecozona.eu/index.php/journal/article/view/519

The discussion of the doll's head and 'material value' which forms one sub-section of Chapter 4 ('Signs of Strangeness II: The plastic doll's head') shares some phrasing with and is developed further in 'The gannet's skull versus the plastic doll's head: material 'value' in Kathleen Jamie's "Findings"', in *Green Letters* 19 (2) 2015, pp. 121 – 131. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14688417.2015.1024156

The publishers of *Green Letters* and *Ecozon@* have confirmed that they give their full permission for the inclusion of this content within the thesis and for its potential subsequent development into a book-length publication.

Key to Brenda Chamberlain archive referencing (Chapter 2)

NLW = National Library of Wales

MS = manuscript

f = folio

r = front of folio

v = back of folio

Manuscripts referred to:

NLW MS 20 21501E (miscellaneous prose)

NLW MS 26 21507B (notebook, 1947)

NLW MS 27 21508B (notebooks and diaries, 1950 – 1951)

NLW MS 30 21511 B (notebooks, 1958 – 1961)

NLW MS 31 21512 B (notebooks, also 1958 – 1961)

NLW ex 2436 (miscellaneous, including a journal thought to have been in use 1950 – 1951)

List of Figures

Figure 1: Map of the islands

Introduction

> Somewhere among the note-books of Gideon I once found a list of diseases as yet unclassified by medical science, and among these there occurred the word Islomania, which was described as a rare but by no means unknown affliction of spirit. There are people, Gideon used to say by way of explanation, who find islands somehow irresistible. The mere knowledge that they are on an island, a little world surrounded by the sea, fills them with an indescribable intoxication.
> –Lawrence Durrell, *Reflections on a Marine Venus*

> But all islands are fragments made significant by the sea's indifferent shifting formlessness, and meaning seems to snag and gather round them, enlarging their outlines on the horizons of the mind.
> –Christine Evans, *Bardsey*

> Listen, I have found the home of my heart
> –Brenda Chamberlain, *Tide-race*

The island imagination

In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), Robert Pogue Harrison explored the place of forests in the cultural imagination of the West, identifying them as sites in which the human relationship with the nonhuman world has been played out both materially and imaginatively. Forests are spaces that lie at the edge, literally and metaphorically, of human civilization, and take on the burden of our species' physical expansion and complex imaginings. Harrison writes:

> However broadly or narrowly one wishes to define it, Western civilization literally cleared its space in the midst of forests. A sylvan fringe of darkness defined the limits of its cultivation, the margins of its cities, the boundaries of its institutional domain; but also the extravagance of its imagination. (1992: ix)

The 'extravagance' of Western civilisation's imagination is revealed in terms of a fascination with forests as sites of otherness, as stages for going beyond the borders of convention, and as the home of 'the outlaws, the heroes, the wanderers, the lovers, the saints, the persecuted, the outcasts, the bewildered, the ecstatic' (247). Forests are paradoxical spaces in which roles are reversed and binaries unsettled. They are simultaneously sacred and profane, monstrous and enchanting, lawless and law-restoring; and, in Harrison's view, in providing a foil to the norms of civilisation they offer a space in which humanity can reflect upon itself.

Timothy Clark, discussing the significance of this work for ecocriticism, identifies the way in which Harrison has focused on 'something that is an empirical part of the natural world […] and yet has also been constitutive for human self-understanding, historically, culturally and imaginatively' (2011: 60). In exploring the cultural forms that

embody the forest imagination, Harrison reveals aspects of human behaviour from which he is able to draw a kind of ecological understanding: a sense of what he calls the 'universal human manner of being in the world' (1992: 201), a notion of what it might mean to 'dwell' on the earth.

The island, I would suggest, has a claim equal to that of the forest to being constitutive for human self-understanding. Like the forest, it is both an empirical part of the natural world and one that resonates historically, culturally and imaginatively. The island is a topographical form that has been, and continues to be, highly significant in terms of biogeographical and anthropological research: observations of natural phenomena made on the Galapagos Islands, for example, informed Charles Darwin's theories of evolution, and culminated in the publication in 1859 of *The Origin of Species*; Margaret Mead's hugely influential work of anthropology *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) was based on research carried out on the Samoan Islands. At the same time, the island occupies a central place in the cultural imagination, particularly that of the Western world (Gillis 2003, 2004, 2007; Tuan 1990). In fact, the island studies scholar Pete Hay states that its imaginative and figurative pull is so strong that the island can be regarded as '*the* central metaphor within western discourse' (2006: 26, emphasis in original). However, for Hay, as for other island studies scholars and postcolonial literary critics, the legacy of imaginative evocations of islands such as those found in *The Tempest* and *Robinson Crusoe* has not necessarily been a positive one; to the contrary, it is seen as being associated with the development of imperialist and colonialist discourses.

The island also shares with the forest other features identified by Harrison. It is a space that has accommodated the expansion of our species (or, more often, and as suggested above, the colonial ambitions of nation-based groups of our species) and provided an immensely rich imaginative locus in which dualisms can be disturbed and human identity explored. Moreover, there is a significant relationship between islands and environmental issues. In his discussion of Harrison's book, Jonathan Bate makes an explicit connection between forests and islands, gesturing towards a postcolonial ecocritical perspective in his evocation of the environmentally destructive tendencies associated with the colonising of islands. He suggests the addition of colonies to Vico's order of human institutions (which provides the spin-off point for Harrison's study) and goes on:

> What does a civilization do when it has chopped down its own forests? It launches expeditions across that other boundary, the sea, and finds new lands to devastate. Thus the island becomes as the forest. (Bate 2000: 88)

However, while there are clearly points of connection between conceptualisations of the forest and the island, there are also some important differences. A key issue is the way in which these topographical features are seen as intersecting with notions of the 'human'. For Harrison, the forest provides an index of human 'outsideness' (1992: 69), always existing in opposition to the civic world, and symbolic of the way in which we are always '*outside of ourselves*' (201, emphasis in original). He sees this alienation as part of a humanising process, and traces its beginning to the rupture of an originary unity between the human and its habitat early in the development of our species. This is linked with changing patterns of human existence (i.e. from hunter to farmer), and compounded by the founding of the civic institutions of religion, matrimony and burial. The disjuncture is deepened by the human phenomenon of language, which both creates and mediates our outsideness, providing the *logos* for the *oikos*—in other words, the space in which to articulate our human-specific manner of dwelling on the earth.

Nevertheless, in Harrison's view, we remain forever excluded. The purpose of the forest and the necessity for its continued existence is, then, to provide us both materially and symbolically with an exclusion-zone that defines our proper manner of dwelling: 'Without such outside domains, there is no inside in which to dwell' (Harrison 1992: 247). The forest is the antithesis of civilisation and we go into it like the hero of medieval romance, who 'rediscovers his alienated nature only in order to reaffirm the law of its overcoming' (247). For Harrison, the forest is, literally and metaphorically, the means by which we know our limits and our difference. Thus, in Harrison's view, the 'global problem of deforestation' (247) is not only an ecological issue (though he acknowledges the gravity of this aspect), but is even more acutely a matter of concern 'because in the depths of cultural memory forests remain the correlate of human transcendence' (247). They represent boundaries in the absence of which 'the human abode loses its grounding', and without which 'there is no inside in which to dwell' (247). Without those sylvan boundaries, we lose our sense of what it means to be human.

The island has also been conceived of as an exclusion zone, with similar connotations of outsideness and isolation, and there is a long tradition of adventurers going to islands and returning changed in some way—perhaps, as with Harrison's medieval knights, having explored the wild outer reaches of the human in order to reassert a more

'civilised' form—in what might be seen as an island-oriented version of the pastoral paradigm of 'retreat and return' (Gifford 1999: i). But islands, as (often) inhabited and (always) richly storied topographies, can also be seen as sites in which the human and the nonhuman are more integrally intertwined. Harrison thinks of the forest as a metonym for the earth, in the sense that it provides us with a measure for our *outsideness*, our estrangement from earth's matrix. The island is also increasingly used as a metonym for the earth, but this time as an indicator of global ecological processes in which human and nonhuman are mutually entangled. Since the publication of those first iconic images of the Earth viewed from space, taken by the crew of Apollo 8 in 1968, which revealed so graphically the fragility and finitude of the planet, the image of tiny 'island-earth' (Bate 2000: 115), turning in space, has rooted itself in the cultural imagination. From these perspectives the island begins to emerge, in contrast to Harrison's view of the forest, not as another measure of our outsideness, but as an index of our complex immersion in the life of the planet. In this it offers a potentially valuable unsettling of the kinds of concepts that play such a significant role in Harrison's study—concepts such as human transcendence, the human abode, and even the 'human' itself.

The notion of fragile island-earth has also contributed to the development of a model in which islands are viewed as an index of the flourishing or non-flourishing of the planet as a whole, and as sites that, given focused attention, might potentially provide us with solutions for broader environmental issues and enhance our ecological understanding.[1] In a speech given in 1999, Kofi A. Annan (then Secretary-General of the United Nations) drew upon the island/earth metonymy, arguing that small islands 'are microcosms for our world' and that 'we are all inhabitants of the global island, surrounded by the limitless ocean of space' (1999: n.p.). He stressed the heightened vulnerability of small islands to environmental change, stating both that islands are on the 'front-line of the global struggle to protect the environment' (n.p.) and that the 'precious and fragile biodiversity of small islands is among the most endangered on earth' (n.p.), and he expressed the ongoing hope that, 'if we can find solutions to the special vulnerabilities of islands, it will help us address more global problems' (n.p.). More recently, Elizabeth DeLoughrey has noted that 'with the increasing threat of global warming, islands have

[1] John Parham, following Michael Allaby's lead, differentiates between environmental and ecological perspectives as follows:

> When we talk about the *environmental*, we are referring either to scientifically informed studies of the actual physical habitats in which animals and humans live or, correspondingly, to changes wrought by humans on those environments and/or campaigns to protect or preserve particular areas […] The scientific model, *ecology* regards all living beings, and the Earth, as systemically interconnected. (2016: 5, emphasis in original)

become harbingers of planetary ecological change' (2011: 1), and Hay argues that islands may now be 'unusually relevant, rather than unimportant backwaters, in the search for modes of living on a small and fraught planet' (2013: 9).

While notions of 'island equilibrium' and islands as *paradigms* of vulnerability have been challenged (see Garrard 2007), particularly in the light of recent flux-based ecological models (see Botkin 1992; 2012), nevertheless there is a clear sense in which islands and environmental issues are, as Bate begins to suggest, integrally connected. Indeed, Richard Grove identifies forms of environmental awareness that predate modern forms of environmentalism and relate specifically to European colonial interactions with tropical islands and islanders, which

> played a steadily more dominant and dynamic part in the constructions of new European evaluations of nature and in the growing awareness of the destructive impact of European economic activity on the peoples and environments of the newly 'discovered' and colonised lands. (1995: 3)

This observation highlights the importance of islands not only in relation to specific environmental issues but also in terms of the development and framing of environmentalism itself. It is a correspondence that has persisted through the centuries. DeLoughrey, following the lead of Donald Worster (1998), argues that, as the devastation of island ecologies continued to play out in 20th century postcolonial settings, the modern concept of ecosystem ecology 'was developed in relation to the radioactive aftermath of US nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific Islands' (2013: 167).

DeLoughrey's observation here reveals a darker side to the notion of the island as a marker of human immersion in the life of the planet. It suggests that the way in which we have conceptualised islands as 'ultimately disposable' (DeLoughrey 2013: 173), or, as Baldacchino argues, as 'tabulae rasae: potential laboratories for any conceivable human project, in thought or in action' (2006: 5-6),[2] has itself played a role in implicating us materially and corporeally in deleterious ways in the matrix of 'island-earth'. The testing of nuclear weapons on the Pacific Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958, an act of 'nuclear colonialism' (Johnston 2015: 140) legitimised, DeLoughrey argues, by the 'myth of island isolation' (2007: 2), has not only had long-drawn out and utterly catastrophic impacts on the health of the islanders themselves (DeLoughrey 2013; Johnston 2015) but continues to make its mark, in tandem with the effects of nuclear tests elsewhere in the world, upon us all. According to Kirsty Spalding *et al*, levels of radiocarbon found in tooth

[2] A tendency encouraged, Baldacchino argues, by literary works such as H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1894) (Baldacchino 2006: 5).

enamel, a 'legacy from above-ground [nuclear] testing' (2005: 333), can be used to date precisely the year in which any individual was born. As Godfrey Baldacchino and Eric Clark assert, 'Ecologically, we are all islanders now' (2013: 131).

It is issues such as the perpetuation of new forms of colonialism and concerns around, for example, the sustainable use of resources, the impacts of tourism, and the implications of sea level changes, that have led to the development of the discipline of island studies. One of its key aims is to develop a field of enquiry in which a 'coherent theory of islandness' (Hay 2006: 19) might be established, in order to assess its

> possible or plausible influence and impact on ecology, human/species behaviour and any of the areas handled by the traditional subject uni-disciplines (such as archaeology, economics or literature), subject multi-disciplines (such as political economy or biogeography) or policy foci/issues (such as governance, social capital, waste disposal, language extinction or sustainable tourism). (Baldacchino 2006: 9)

Baldacchino's formulation, which brings into conjunction ecology and human/species behaviour, and incorporates a broad range of inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches, shares some common ground with ecocriticism, which also has a particular interest in investigating conceptual models and their impacts on ecology and (especially) human behaviour. But while island studies leans more strongly towards models of enquiry that are 'essentially social scientific' (King 1991, cited in King and discussants 2015: 8) within its broad remit (although there *are* scholars engaged in literary studies within this field, as will be made clear in the discussion that follows), ecocriticism focuses specifically on the study of cultural representations of human interactions with the nonhuman world. At the heart of ecocriticism lies the contention, articulated by Lawrence Buell, that the environmental crisis is in large part a 'crisis of the imagination' (1995: 2), and that the amelioration of this crisis depends upon finding 'better ways of imaging nature and humanity's relation to it' (2).

Taking an ecocritical approach, this thesis investigates literary representations of small islands, attempting, as does Harrison with the forest imagination, to assess the possible implications of these cultural formulations for an understanding of the 'human manner of being in the world' (1992: 201). It explores the notion that literature might enable us, as Judith Schalansky argues in her *Pocket Atlas of Remote Islands*, to 'get a hold on' (2012: 8-9) qualities of islandness that are less available to other forms of discourse and disciplinary enquiry. The thesis takes as its premise the belief that islands have been, and are perhaps increasingly, distinctive and significant sites for imaging nature and

humanity's relation to it, and that there is an 'island imagination', which, in its multiple forms, plays a significant role in the negotiation and imaging of the human place in the world. The fascination with islands and their particular qualities—the 'islomania' described by Lawrence Durrell (2000: 1) in the epigraph to this Introduction—has led to passionately attentive attempts to 'write the island' in which the empirical and the imaginative are densely interwoven, and which offer complex imagings of an interrelationship between human and nonhuman. The research presented here assesses and critiques these imagings.

The thesis also attempts to respond to Baldacchino and Clark's recent suggestion, following the lead of the Pacific poet and scholar Teresia Teaiwa, that we should regard 'island' as a verb: 'If islandness is a particular state or condition of being, there is a corresponding action in islanding. We propose island as a verb, islanding as an action' (2013: 129). Baldacchino and Clark argue that this approach is necessary in order 'to mediate and attenuate dizzying oscillations between paradise and prison, openness and closure, roots and routes, materiality and metaphor' (129). While these dichotomies are typical of cultural representations specific to islands, they also resonate with the kinds of binaries that ecocriticism also seeks to mediate and attenuate, in the broader context of human relationships with the nonhuman world. The parallel binaries challenged by ecocriticism include, for example, biblically-inflected conceptualisations of 'nature' as either paradisal or hellish; the openness or closure, permeability or stability, of both the human subject and the societies in which we dwell; related notions of localised dwelling and belonging versus nomadism and cosmopolitanism; and the intersections between culturally constructed 'nature' and its material counterpart. These correspondences are indicative once again of the potential relevance of the study of islandness to ecocritical thinking. Hence the thesis attempts to 'island' ecocriticism, while at the same time bringing the tools of ecocriticism to the search for features of islandness. In the research that follows I have understood islandness to mean both the particular island-specific qualities that seem to emerge in the texts, as well as the ways in which these qualities are then invested with additional layers of meaning and significance as they take shape in the literary island imaginations of the writers studied. The project represents, to the best of my knowledge, the first thesis-length ecocritical study of island literature from the British and Irish archipelago.

The key research questions are as follows:

1. What can an ecocritical reading of literary (as opposed to empirical or scientific) island writing contribute to an understanding of islandness?
2. Reciprocally, in what ways can an understanding of islandness take ecocritical debate forward?

These questions underpin the main aims of the thesis, which are:

1. To investigate literary representations of islands in order to identify qualities of islandness, and to engage with debate over the status and value of literary island writing within the field of island studies, particularly in terms of its negotiation and deployment of island tropes and metaphors.
2. To apply recent formulations of ecocritical theory in order to assess island literature's representation of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, and, where possible, to draw out environmentally/ecologically-oriented aspects of the writing, while at the same time testing out the robustness of ecocritical theory in this context.

In contrast to Harrison's sweeping, historical exploration of forests, this study presents a small-scale, detailed analysis of literary representations of islands in the selected post-1960 literature of four small islands or island groups around the British and Irish archipelago: Aran (Árainn) in the west of Ireland; Bardsey (Ynys Enlli) off North Wales; the almost-island of Orford Ness off the east coast of England; and the outliers of Scotland's Outer Hebrides—the Shiants, North Rona, Sula Sgeir, the Monach islands, and St Kilda (see *Figure* 1, p.10). The decision to work on British and Irish islands was prompted by the gathering interest in the contemporary critical and creative writing of these shores—particularly within archipelagic perspectives—in mapping and counter-mapping, in both literal and imaginative terms, the coasts and islands of the archipelago. The islands have been chosen for their broad geographical spread, which traces a trajectory from the far west of Ireland, to the Welsh coast, to the far north west of Scotland and then down to the east of England.

The rationale for the selection of islands is strengthened by the fact that all of the islands/island groups, and indeed some of the primary texts themselves, feature in the work of Robert Macfarlane, either in his own creative writing or, in the case of Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, in his introduction to the Faber and Faber edition. Indeed, Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* provided the starting point for the selection process, with its references to Árainn, Sula Sgeir. North Rona and Hirta (St Kilda) and, especially, its

chapters devoted to Bardsey and Orford Ness. Once I began to research the literature of these islands, certain texts came to the fore: texts that powerfully evoked varied and distinctive versions of islandness, and that, in each respective case, suggested a particular thematic and critical approach. It also quickly became apparent that these islands and their authors were linked in a variety of ways—culturally (through their literatures), for example, and ecologically (through their seabirds and sea mammals, for example)—in a manner that, as I discuss throughout the thesis, expands and augments the concept of the archipelagic. *Figure* 2 (Appendix 1) shows a mind-map which traces just some of the links that began to emerge between islands and islands, authors and authors, and authors and islands, as I developed the shape and focus of the research.

The primary texts studied in the thesis are Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* (1985) and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* (1995); Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race* (1962); Christine Evans*' Island of Dark Horses* (1995); W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* (1998); Adam Nicolson's *Sea Room: An Island Life* (2001); Kathleen Jamie's *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012); and Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* (2012a). All of these texts are island-themed to some degree. Some are entirely devoted to a particular island or island group (*Stones of Aran; Tide-race; Island of Dark Horses; Sea Room*); others range across landscapes but engage specifically with certain islands (*Findings; Sightlines; The Old Ways*). *The Rings of Saturn,* an anomaly in the thesis in more than one respect, devotes one small but immensely powerful section to a shingle spit on the Suffolk coast. Apart from Christine Evans' poetry collection, the texts are ostensibly non-fiction, but as will be discussed, represent a range of innovative, hybrid literary forms that challenge generic description. Given my lack of knowledge of the Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh languages, I have selected Anglophone texts, with the exception of *The Rings of Saturn*, which was originally written in German. I have included this work on the basis that it centres on a walking tour through the east of England, is widely read in its English translation, and is rapidly attaining canonical status within the field of English Literature. I also argue in Chapter 3 that the notion of 'translation' is in itself a significant element in Sebald's portrayal of islandness.

I have chosen to work on post-1960 literature because this decade is regarded as having witnessed the beginning of widespread environmental consciousness. Greg Garrard suggests that there is a general consensus that the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962, which describes a rural community moving from pastoral idyll to environmental catastrophe, marked the beginning of 'modern environmentalism' (2012a:

1). Carson's tale focuses on the destructive impact of organic pesticides on the environment, but Garrard highlights the way in which Carson also built upon the nuclear 'fallout hysteria' (7) and fear of human-generated apocalypse that were already present in the public imagination of the time (6-7). The island texts studied in the thesis are not necessarily explicitly environmental, but I would contend that they are at least underpinned by a sense of ecological vulnerability, albeit to different degrees that largely correlate with their date of publication,[3] with the most recent works engaging most explicitly with the notion of environmental crisis.

The two major sections that follow function as an overview of the conceptual framework of the thesis and a literature review. In the first section I introduce the four strands of contemporary thought that provide the critical framework, discussing the ways in which these approaches are relevant and necessary to my enquiry, and in the second I give an overview of the literary backdrop to the study of islands.

Critical framework and literature review

The research presented in this thesis draws upon recent developments in island studies, cultural geography, archipelagic perspectives in British and Irish critical and creative writing, and ecocriticism, with the first and last providing the overarching theoretical framework and receiving the most detailed attention here. This interdisciplinary selection is necessitated by the complex nature of the subject. The search for literary islandness requires an understanding of questions surrounding the concept of islandness itself, an area of enquiry central to island studies. The multi-layered quality of island literature, its characteristic hybridity, and the complexity of its evocations of landscape, call for cultural geography's increasingly expansive understanding of 'place' and corollary interest in 'more-than-representational' discourses that move away from the purely 'scientific'.

This championing of the creative narrative as a response to landscape is mirrored and developed in archipelagic perspectives. These highlight the potentially global significance of attentive readings of the local, and at the same time, in a direct correspondence with island studies, stress the interconnections between islands and other

[3] Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race* was published in 1962, the same year as *Silent Spring,* and so marginally predates the specific forms of awareness raised by Carson's book, though not the context of their emergence. In a 1968 letter to Meic Stephens, at that time the Literature Director of the Welsh Arts Council, Chamberlain outlines her desire to write a book about the sea 'in the abstract sense, not the scientific, like that marvellous work, 'The Sea Around Us', but something written out of my life's experience of living with the sea' (cited in Piercy, 2013: 360), evidence of her familiarity with Rachel Carson's work.

islands, coasts and coasts. Lastly, ecocritical theorisations, especially those emerging from a broadly posthumanist remit, underpin the specifically ecological focus of the enquiry. They provide ways into discussion, in the context of the island, of the contested nature of human being-in-the-world and of the concept of the human *per se,* along with a theoretical framework for addressing concepts such as the vitality and agency of the nonhuman world and the relationship between materiality and metaphor. What will also become evident in the course of this introduction is the transversal nature of these disciplines. Though I address them separately, I also identify some of their many intersections.

I. Island studies: 'rescuing the real'

In 2006 Godfrey Baldacchino spearheaded a move to focus the emerging interdisciplinary field of island studies through the launch of the online *Island Studies Journal* (*ISJ*) (based in Prince Edward Island, Canada), complemented in 2007 by the launch of *Shima: The International Journal of Research into Island Cultures* (facilitated by the Asia-Pacific Islands Program) and the publication in the same year of Baldacchino's own edited collection *A World of Islands: An Island Studies Reader* (2007b). The expressed aim of the movement is to develop, if possible, 'a coherent theory of islandness' (Hay, 2006: 19). An alternative term for the field—'Nissology' (used by Depraetere in 1991, as cited in Baldacchino 2008; McCall 1994)—is defined as 'the study of islands on their own terms' (Baldacchino 2013; Depraetere 2008: 3, following McCall 1994: 2), and reflects island studies' commitment to developing a discourse *by* and *with* islanders rather than *about* them. The force of this commitment arises from the perception that 'No other type of territory has been so affected by the colonial endeavour as islands' (Baldacchino and Royle 2010: 140). Thus, the discipline is dedicated to fostering 'a process of empowerment, a reclaiming of island histories and cultures, particularly for those island people which have endured decades of colonialism' (Baldacchino 2008: 37). This foregrounding of the islander's voice is seen as a form of resistance to current totalising forces of globalisation which threaten to destroy valued aspects of island cultural and economic autonomy (Hay, 2006). At the same time, islands are seen as a vital means of interpreting those globalising processes: as essential components in the development of 'a holistic understanding of the world archipelago and its ongoing globalization' (Depraetere 2008: 3).

The discussion of how best to develop a coherent theory of islandness involves questions about the definition of an island itself—a more controversial issue than may at

first be anticipated. Hay argues: 'the question of what constitutes an island is not conclusively settled, and what constitutes a *small* island is a particularly contested issue' (2006: 20, emphasis in original). Asked to describe the characteristics of an island, one would perhaps immediately think of an isolated, remote place, bounded, difficult of access and surrounded by the sea. However, as Baldacchino points out, 'The mere rendition of island as "a piece of land surrounded by water"' is academically imprecise' (2007a: 4). Historically, the word island did not have a fixed definition and did not always denote a place surrounded by water: 'To medieval minds islands were not, as they are for us, a distinctive category' (Gillis 2003: 21), and 'isle' meant 'any isolated or remote territory, whether landlocked or sea-girt' (19). This flexible application is mirrored in more contemporary studies of islands that have encompassed 'not only islands in the sea, but also islands in inland waters, and island-like habitats such as mountain tops, lakes and even patches of vegetation, and individual plants' (Williamson 1981: v, cited in Beer 1989: 16). This expansive application of the term continues in expressions such as 'urban heat island' and, of course, as we have seen, the metonymic 'island-earth'. It suggests that 'island' is a fluid concept, in which the possibility of reinterpretation is always present and the empirical and the metaphorical are integrally connected.

How, then, does one go about defining an island? How does the size of the land mass play into the definition? Must an island always be surrounded by water? And what happens when the island is bridged to the mainland? Focusing on the ambivalence that bridging creates within the definition of the island, Céline Barthon asks 'whether a material infrastructure (in this particular study, a bridge) can modify the structure of a particular geographic space' (219). She draws attention to the relative lack of research interest in islands that are connected to mainlands, as if their linked status 'somehow supressed and extinguished their histories and identities' (2007: 219). Barthon's observations point up further the contingency of both empirical and cultural definitions.

There is also some discussion about whether or not there can really be any significant common ground between the multiplicity of islands and island peoples on the earth. Owe Ronstrőm cites a recent calculation that there are some 680 billion islands in the world (including those subsets of islands classed as 'islets' and 'rocks') (2012: 154), and Baldacchino, who envisions the planet as a 'world of islands' (2007b), summarises the global extent of island life: 'When excluding continents, islands cover some 7% of the Earth's land surface, and are home to some 10% of the world's population' (2008: 38). Thus Hay argues:

> Whatever islandness is, it seems likely to be quite different for islands that are unambiguously small as against those that are not; for tropical islands as against cold or temperate ones; for islands primarily inhabited by aboriginal people as against islands now dominated by immigrant peoples who have settled within the last two to three centuries; for continental islands as against oceanic ones; for resource-rich as against resource-poor islands; for urbanised versus arcadian versus wild islands. (2006: 20)

For the purposes of this research, it is important to bear in mind that any forms of islandness identified, even within the thesis' limited selection of four continental, coldwater islands or island groups situated in the north-eastern Atlantic Ocean, are likely to be varied and individual. This is perhaps all the more the case since coldwater islands are regarded as having characteristics that resist the more generic descriptions applied to warmwater islands, with the emphasis in representations resting on their 'specific and often unique features' (Butler 2006: 249). Nevertheless, despite an acknowledgement of the diversity of islands and island life, island studies continues to provide a forum for the broad discussion of nissology. Baldacchino's early confidence that the 'comparative, global, inter-disciplinary and/or trans-disciplinary study of islands is possible and plausible' (2006: 6) has been repaid by the burgeoning of the discipline, and has provided, if not the establishment of a coherent theory of islandness, as Hay hopes, at least a basis for ongoing debate.

Given the contention that there *is* a plausible basis for research into the qualities of islandness, the next question to address is how islandness might be conceived. Hay's phrase 'whatever islandness is' (2006: 20) suggests that there may be no easy answers. However, there is a sense within the field that such a phenomenon might exist, and that it might exist in a manner that can be identified not just in terms of individual islands, but also in a more generalisable sense. Philip Conkling, who suggests that the term islandness was, if not coined by, then at least popularised by the novelist John Fowles, argues that 'Islanders from different archipelagos share a sense of islandness that transcends the particulars of local island culture' (2007: 191). He continues:

> Islandness is a metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation. Islandness is reinforced by boundaries of often frightening and occasionally impassable bodies of water that amplify a sense of place that is closer to the natural world because you are in closer proximity to your neighbours. (191)

For Conkling, and significantly for this thesis, islandness is characterised both by 'heightened experience' and by 'a sense of place that is closer to the natural world' (191). However, his notion of islandness as 'metaphysical' has been challenged by recent, more

embodied, accounts of islandness. Likewise, his other touchstones—boundedness and isolation—have also been critically reassessed in debates within island studies concerning the discipline's ontologies and epistemologies.

Hay, in his field-defining and in some respects polemical essay, 'A Phenomenology of Islands' (2006), in the launch issue of *Island Studies Journal* (*ISJ*), identifies three main faultlines, and it is worth looking at these in order to trace the ways in which they have subsequently been addressed, or, as Hay asserts, have become 'utterly intractable' (2013: 209). To begin with the first, Hay feels that the notion of the island's 'hard edge', has contributed to (and been reinforced by) the tropes of island boundedness and isolation, and has perhaps been particularly appealing to non-islanders. He suggests that while these qualities have been associated with certain positive elements of islandness such as resilience, versatility and a strong sense of identity, they have also contributed to the idea of islands as cut off, limited and vulnerable. Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith associate the notion of the bounded island with the colonising impulse. They write: 'Boundedness makes islands graspable, able to be held in the mind's eye and imagined as places of possibility and promise' (2003: 2), concluding that 'islands, unlike continents, look like property' (1).

An awareness of the negative impact of such connotations is reflected in a corresponding desire in island studies to move away from notions of boundedness and isolation. Hay details the corresponding development of a more complex understanding of islandness that emphasises islands' interconnectedness, and sees their edge as 'a mobile, fluid or permeable boundary' (2006: 22) thus reframing the island as a 'liberated zone; a site of possibility' (22). In the launch issue of *ISJ,* Baldacchino poses as a parenthetical question '(the beckoning study of archipelagoes?)' (2006: 10), and indeed, in the intervening years since the publication of this volume, there has been an increased interest in the field in archipelagic and aquapelagic perspectives: approaches that focus upon mapping island to island connections and recognising the role of the sea as a connective medium.

These perspectives build upon the concept of 'archipelagraphy', a term coined by DeLoughrey specifically to denote 'a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents' (2001: 23). Jonathan Pugh welcomes the valuably dis-orientating quality of such an approach, arguing that it 'deeply challenges how we think about the world and our relation to it' (2013: 11). As suggested above, there has also been a renewed focus upon the waters that surround

and connect islands. Philip Hayward argues that the term archipelagic itself needs reframing since it has been conceptualised as referring to 'the land area of a group of islands *within* a sea' (2012a: 3, underlining and emphasis in original), underestimating the function and importance of the sea itself. He suggests the alternative formulation of archipelago as 'aquapelago', by which he means: 'an assemblage of the marine and land spaces of a group of islands and their adjacent waters' (5). These more recent developments coincide closely with British and Irish archipelagic perspectives in critical and creative writing, as discussed in section III.

Hay's second faultline relates to the impact on island memory and identity of movements of populations to and from islands. He sees migrations as an inevitable part of island life, both inward and outward, making the important point that for some inhabitants, island boundedness and isolation (if they are perceived as such) can be seen as something to escape from. However, Hay is concerned that too much movement damages a necessary sense of island identity, and he fears that

> Perhaps the entities that we call islands are dissolving into a terrain-denying mesh of global information networks, a trend accompanied by an unprecedented transit of people. If so, is it not likely that island memory will vanish as the last intermediate-term resident swings away on the global roundabout? (2006: 23-24)

Island identity is thus seen as having been caught between two forms of attack: from historical colonialism (and its modern day counterparts of continental impositions) and, as outlined by Hay here, from the globalising, technological processes of homogenisation and large-scale movements of people. Thus Hay argues,

> Perhaps the most contested faultline within island studies is whether islands are characterised by vulnerability or resilience; whether they are victims of change, economically dependent, and at the mercy of unscrupulous neo-colonial manipulation, or whether they are uniquely resourceful in the face of such threats. (2006: 21)

Baldacchino, too, worries that 'the insider/outsider distinction does not work all that well when it comes to islands, where hybridity is the norm' (2008: 37), and where hybridity has perhaps always been the norm, since, as John Connell argues, movements of people and cultural hybridities were a feature of islandness even before the onset of European colonialism (2011: 265-6). In fact, while remaining consistent in his conviction that the insider voice is a vital component of islandness, a necessary counterpoint to 'colonialist and continentalist' impositions (2013: 15), Baldacchino explores the potential advantages of outsider narratives, particularly in terms of their freedom to comment in an uninhibited fashion: 'Outsiders, then, spared from being party to the divisions and personal

animosities of their looked-at sub-set, could provide valid and insightful commentaries on island life' (2008: 43). They may even be more likely to attempt to articulate islandness than insiders. Conkling observes, perhaps arguably, that 'islandness is a heightened perception felt by outsiders but rarely by islanders themselves' (2007: 192).

Hay's third faultline is also of particular relevance, since it is here that he expresses his distrust of island metaphor and, by association, literary evocations and explorations of islandness. For Hay, literature is the source of a whole raft of island tropes and metaphors that collectively constitute an 'appropriation of island realness' (2006: 19), and the study of these is characterised as dismissing 'the physical reality of islands whilst promoting the relevance of metaphorical abstractions' (29).[4] He is not alone in this opinion. Stephen Royle (2001) condemns island literature for promulgating an island 'myth', a view reiterated by Gillis (2004) and Baldacchino (2007b). Baldacchino further critiques this myth for its tendency to obscure islands as 'real lived-in places' (2008: 44) and recommends 'a strategic retreat from the exclusive representation of "the island" as metaphor' (2013: 14). Hay heads his section on the literature faultline with the combative title 'Rescuing the Real: Metaphor and the "Hard Stuff" of Islands' (2006: 26). He suggests that 'islanders [are] entitled to view all promotions of metaphorical senses of islands as *acts of post-colonial appropriation*' (30, emphasis mine), and his resolution of the faultline is simply the 'excision from the purview of island studies' (19) of those 'for whom "island" best functions as metaphor' (19).

This polemical view is understandable when one considers the ways in which tropes of islandness have been promulgated in the service of dominant colonial, post- and neo-colonial powers, and involved in the suppression of the individual qualities of islands, and the subjugation of both the islands and their inhabitants to framings and discourses that legitimise various externally imposed uses and abuses. In fact, this perception of the politically charged and potentially destructive power of the tropes and metaphors of islandness has been taken up in postcolonial literary criticism, which has played a vital role in identifying and critiquing the imperialist discourses that have been historically so damaging to island life and autonomy. Scholars such as Gillian Beer, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Lisa Fletcher, and Diana Loxley have all contributed invaluable work.

[4] He gives the example of the environmental philosopher Mary Midgley's 1983 essay 'Duties Concerning Islands: Of Rights and Obligations' as an example of the way in which actual islands can disappear from view in the face of metaphorical abstraction. He states: 'there is not a single observation in this paper about islands, or of any individual island' (2006: 29-30).

Ironically, however, this focus on the negative connotations of literary tropes of the island has also presented Hay with another reason to mistrust the role of literature and literary studies. He argues that the identification of negative constructions of the island—for example as a trope of colonialism, deployed in order to perpetuate ongoing structures of dominance—has encouraged a view of islandness as 'a dysfunctional state' (2006: 28). Furthermore, he worries that this association of islands with postcolonialism has rendered suspect any attempts to champion island identity by associating them with structures of dominance that resist the fluid and migratory nature of modern existence. This paradox—the problem of how to address the question of local identity in the face of dominant globalising forces without appearing to endorse retrogressive ideologies of rootedness and belonging—is one that arises in the other strands of the thesis' critical framework: in discussions of 'place' in cultural geography; in the championing of 'localism' in archipelagic perspectives; and in ecocriticism's engagement with the vexed question of 'dwelling'.

While there are clearly grounds for Hay's negative perception of both island metaphor and the critical approaches that have sought to analyse its function, it is a somewhat sweeping perspective when applied indiscriminately to the whole body of literature. This is an aspect of island studies with which Lisa Fletcher takes issue in her article 'Island Studies—some distance to go'. She perceives an 'underlying distrust of literature' (2011a: 23) in the field, and argues that, 'As it stands, "island studies" scholarship is undermined by an untheorised distinction between the relative value of "geography" and "literature"' (18). In exploring the apparent mistrust of literature in the field she detects 'an implicit agreement that studying the *real* world is a more meaningful and important pursuit than inquiry into the *imagined world*, and further that it is possible to have a privileged understanding of the real world' (23, emphasis in original). In her analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, she suggests that the novel's merging of fictional and factual histories enables a perspective that reveals that 'any individual's comprehension of a locality and its history is contingent on multiple vectors of identity and thus always partial and vulnerable to change' (Fletcher 2011b: 11). In this, she argues, literary texts have much to contribute to island studies, and she makes a case for the ongoing development of what she terms 'island literary studies' (King and discussants 2015: 12).

This thesis certainly does not set out to defend perspectives for which islandness functions *best* or *exclusively* as a metaphor, but instead to suggest that non-empirical

discourses that involve the use of metaphor in their articulation of islandness may have much to offer island studies, and may help to challenge the assumed dualism of the discourses of geography and literature. It also takes into consideration the view articulated by the ecocritic Kate Rigby, that there is a power inherent in certain topographies that can evoke an embodied and pre-conceptual human response, and that to regard landscape as a 'blank screen for human projections' (2004: 13) is 'to consign nature once again to the position that it has always occupied within the history of Western dualistic thought; namely that of passivity' (13). Hay's distrust of literature displays a reluctance to entertain the possibility, firstly, that islands might play a role in both the creation of and resistance to their tropes, and, secondly, that not all island metaphors are necessarily acts of imposition and appropriation. Interestingly, Hay references Nicolson's description in *Sea Room* of the barrier between self and world on the Shiant islands as being 'wafer-thin' (Nicolson 2002: 140, cited in Hay 2006: 23). This is, of course, a metaphor. Though he does not acknowledge it directly, his reiteration of Nicolson's image suggests that, for Hay, some literary metaphors deployed in relation to aspects of islandness may be of value to island studies. It perhaps also raises the broader possibility that metaphor and other literary devices may be a means by which certain aspects of islandness, especially those registered phenomenologically, become accessible to our comprehension.

In fact, Hay himself suggests that the way into a full understanding of island 'place' is through a phenomenological approach. In answering the question of why islands attract so much attention, he outlines their qualities as follows:

> Islands—*real* islands, real geographical entities—attract affection, loyalty, identification. And what do you get when you take a bounded geographical entity and add an investment of human attachment, loyalty, meaning? You get the phenomenon known as 'place'. Islands are places—special places, paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled. (2006: 31)

His phenomenology of islands proposes a means through which such richness might be apprehended. He calls for an approach that

> lays stress upon vernacular constructions of meaning and their attendant technologies, beliefs, value codes and myth structures via a process of multi-sensorial receptivity to that-which-would-be-known, an openness that collapses the critical distance between subject and object, insisting that the two flow into each other. (33)

Hay has here, in effect, described the very qualities of islandness that have fostered the affection, loyalty and interest of the authors studied in this thesis, and outlined approaches that resonate powerfully with their writing. They certainly find islands to be

paradigmatic places, such that Árainn for Tim Robinson is '*the* exemplary terrain' (2008 [1985]: 20, emphasis in original) in which to explore his ideas of dwelling and the 'good step'; they also see them as topographies of meaning, (as evidenced, for example, in the resonance for Brenda Chamberlain and Christine Evans of Bardsey island's association with spirituality), and as reflecting a dramatic distillation of the qualities of place—a phenomenon that enters into their accounts in a variety of ways. Moreover, there is powerful evidence in the texts of a desire to maintain a phenomenological openness to 'that-which-would-be-known', to the impacts of heightened experience, and to the potential for an interplay between self and world that collapses the subject/object distinction, in a phenomenon that Adam Nicolson describes as, 'the permeability of the skin, the flippability of inner and outer' (2002: 140).

Hay's deepening interest in the concept of place is mirrored in Lisa Fletcher's proposal of a performative approach to articulating islandness: one that 'foregrounds an appreciation of the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between places and the ways in which they are depicted' (2011a: 27). For Fletcher, the

> core insight which the term performative helps to articulate is that those aspects of human culture which purport to describe social and material reality in fact create the vectors by which we navigate and comprehend that reality. (26)

Her insight points up both the culturally mediated nature of empirical discourse and the potential of other forms of representation to offer alternative vectors for understanding our being in the world. She proposes an approach to the island as a space of cultural production 'which privileges neither geography or literature […] but insists on their interconnection' (18). Remaining alert to this mutually constitutive relationship between places and their cultural depictions may help to avoid some of the pitfalls identified by island studies scholars of focusing on discourses *about* islands. Owe Ronström asks, 'When representations of islands are the focus of study, what about island as locus?' (2013: 153). This question pinpoints one of the key issues in the research that follows, particularly given its ecocritical focus: how to maintain a connection with the materiality of islands as one studies their cultural representations, and how to reflect upon the interplay between the two.

Baldacchino's ambitiously broad outlining of the field, along with Hay's combative faultlines, and the interventions of Fletcher, form the backdrop to a recent expansion of island studies that has seen the emergence of a range of creative responses both within the field and beyond. Hay, perhaps a little out of kilter with other developments in this area,

has recently argued in favour of focusing attention upon 'psychologies of island experience' (2013: 209)—distinctive subjectivities that emerge in response to the physical qualities of islands and their surrounding seas. Phillip Vannini and Jonathan Taggart (2013) propose an embodied, practice-based interpretation of islandness, summing up their practice through the question 'how do you do your island?' (235). Stratford *et al* have drawn attention to the need 'to articulate new research agendas to explore alternative cultural geographies and alternative performances, representations and experiences of islands' (2011: 114), and indeed 2013 saw the 'islanding' of cultural geography in a special edition of *Cultural Geographies* edited by Baldacchino and Clark.

This inter- and multi-disciplinary richness has resulted in increasingly productive and complex—though perhaps also correspondingly slippery and processual—accounts of islandness. In their introduction to this special issue, Baldacchino and Clark summarise the complexity of contemporary island studies, drawing attention to its interest in islands as 'assemblages',[5] and in concepts of island materiality.[6] They write:

> In a world increasingly formed by seamless flows of matter and energy, of bundles of activities and movements between them, of isolating connections and connecting isolations, islands can help us to better understand how this flux comes together, permitting privileged glimpses of the quintessentially fluid 'entanglements of life'. Such a 'world of islands' becomes a set of moments of assemblage, of connective tissue, mobilities and multiplicities. DeLoughrey describes this eloquently as an *archipelagraphy*: a re-presentation of identity, interaction, space and place that proceeds as different combinations of affect, materiality, performance, things. Such 'counter-mapping' requires first dislocating and de-territorializing the objects of study—the fixity of island-as-noun—and 'constituting in their place a site or viewing platform by which they are perceived and analysed afresh and anew'. (Baldacchino and Clark 2013: 130, citing Stratford *et al* 2011)

I have cited this long passage in full because of its relevance to the thesis as a whole. The publication of the special edition of *Cultural Geographies* post-dates much of the research that has gone into the making of this thesis, but corresponds with a number of the approaches I have taken, as well as resonating with some of the most recent developments in the other critical strands that inform my research. The discussion presented in the thesis includes investigations of themes such as the interplay of nature and culture; the performative qualities of certain island texts; the prevalence of archipelagic and aquapelagic elements; the applicability to the study of islandness of concepts drawn from the material turn in contemporary thought; a consideration of islands as assemblages; the

[5] See also Hayward 2012a and 2012b; Stratford *et al* 2011.
[6] See also Baldacchino's argument that it is ''things' that become seeped in, and with, social memory in their production and consumption' (2013: 14).

relevance to the field of recent conceptualisations of affect theory; and the potential for the de-territorialising and re-territorialising of island place in the context of (cosmic) Space and deep time. Moreover, in keeping with its ecocritical foundation, and its corresponding commitment to exploring, where possible, a less human-centric line of enquiry, I have tried to supplement Vannini and Taggart's question 'how do you do your island?' with a query that both embraces the notion of a more mutual co-construction between islander and island and reflects a sense of the independent being of the island itself. In other words, I have also attempted to ask of each text, 'how does your island do you?'

In the following section I briefly outline cultural geography's interest in the potential of narrative writing to explore the kinds of performative and phenomenological approaches called for in island studies, as well the field's development of new conceptualisations of 'place' that perhaps ultimately challenge the adequacy of those very interpretations of performativity and phenomenology.

II. Cultural geography: extending place

In recent decades there has been a movement in cultural geography towards increasingly complex theorisations of place. The relevance of these theorisations to *island* place seems especially pertinent given the sense (articulated, for example by Hay 2006; Conkling 2007; and Nicolson 2001) that islandness somehow involves a heightened or intensified relationship between self and world. As we have seen, some of these developments have already been incorporated into the theorisations and methodologies of island studies, but may have yet more to offer, potentially even moving beyond the proposed phenomenologies and performativities of contemporary nissology.

The work of Doreen Massey has been particularly influential in terms of devising new models for the understanding of place. A recurrent feature of her work is the discussion of the notion of 'time-space compression'. 'The argument is,' Massey writes,

> that we are living through a period (the precise dating is usually quite vague) of immense spatial upheaval, that this is an era of a new and powerful globalization, of instantaneous worldwide communication, of the break-up of what were once local coherencies, of a new and violent phase of 'space-time compression'. (1994: 157)

The problem for Massey is that when this compression is perceived as disorientating, and disruptive to personal identities and those of place, 'then a recourse to place as a source of authenticity and stability may be one of the responses' (122), and she strongly critiques the particular view she associates with a renewal of

> exclusivist claims to places—nationalist, regionalist and localist. All of them have been attempts to fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities and to claim them for one's own. (1994: 4)

This critique, of course, is the backdrop to the kind of problem identified by Hay: the tensions that arise when trying to establish a sense of island identity while at the same time attempting to avoid retrogressive forms of exclusivity.

In place of nationalist, regionalist and localist perspectives, Massey offers a far more open, permeable model:

> The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple. And the particularity of any place is, in these terms, constructed not by placing boundaries around it and defining its identity through counterposition to the other which lies beyond, but precisely (in part) through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* that 'beyond'. Places viewed this way are open and porous. (1994: 5)

It is a deft formulation that perhaps resolves the apparent tension Hay describes between concepts of local and global identity, and it is one that is also relevant to the archipelagic tendencies in island studies, to the literary archipelagic perspectives described in section III, and to certain recent developments in ecocriticism discussed in section IV. Any one place can be understood to be specific and individual *through*, and not in spite of, its links and interconnections to what lies beyond, thus enabling 'a way of thinking about place that retains a sense of identity but is also "progressive" and open' (Smith 2012: 76).

The model is all the more open since, as Massey adds, 'the particular mix of social relations which are thus part of what defines the uniqueness of any place is by no means all included within that space itself' (1994: 5). It is interesting to note Massey's use of the word space here, which seems to imply that it relates to the physical dimensions of place. Space is of course a much debated term in geography and beyond, with a range of complex interpretations, often acting in binary opposition to the concept of place. Places are seen as typically bounded entities, 'centers of felt value' (Tuan 2001: 4) and the locus for concepts such as home and belonging (Massey 1994), whereas space has been viewed, according to Massey, as an 'absence of temporality' (1999: 264), as 'the dimension precisely where nothing "happened", and as a dimension devoid of effect or implications' (1994: 3). Massey's expanded notion of place enables us to think place and space in conjunction, with place no longer conceptualised as bounded, and space no longer seen as unformed and disconnected from materiality, but the two as always interconnected, particularly through the dimension of time. In the course of this thesis, I adopt this expansive model,

and do not differentiate between space and place, except in Chapter 1, in order to distinguish between place and Tim Robinson's invocation of cosmic 'Space'.

Massey's understanding of space-time is, as noted, crucial to this expanded sense of place. She writes:

> If, however the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social relations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings […] (1994: 5)

She uses this notion in part as a framework for exploring the social relations and their implicit dynamics of power—particularly those relating to class and gender—that exist within and stretch out from any one locale at any one moment, and she stresses that

> the geography of social relations forces us to recognise our interconnectedness, and underscores the fact that both personal identity and the identity of those envelopes of space-time in which and between which we live and move (and have our 'Being') are constructed precisely through that interconnectedness. (1994: 122)

I would argue that Massey's complex, relational vision of place-based identity is particularly relevant when it comes to considering islands. Tellingly, the final paragraphs of the space and identity section of *Space, Place and Gender* are devoted to discussion of an island text: Dorothy Carrington's *Granite Island* (2008 [1971]). Massey praises the way in which Carrington explores 'all the different layers of peoples and cultures' (1994: 156) that have come into contact with the island of Corsica, and all the waves of incomers from other areas of the world. 'It is', Massey writes,

> a sense of place, an understanding of its 'character', which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognise that, without being threatened by it. What we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place. (1994: 156)

An island, then, is perhaps the ideal place to develop such a full and layered sense of place. Moreover, Massey's observation of interconnectedness can also be seen, with only a little adjustment of focus, as a profoundly ecological view. Her notion of a global sense of the local, and a global sense of place leads us to one of the most influential ecocritical texts of recent years: Ursula Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* (2008), discussed in section IV.

The complexity of recent conceptualisations of place has led to calls within cultural geography for a reappraisal of forms of geographic writing. Hayden Lorimer has rephrased Nigel Thrift's formulation concept of 'non-representational' (Thrift 1996: 6) as 'more-

than-representational' theory[7]—'an umbrella term for diverse work that seeks better to cope with our self-evidently more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds' (Lorimer 2005: 83). Previous 'representational' geographic writing is seen as having had a deadening effect that 'framed, fixed and rendered inert all that ought to be most lively' (84). In particular, Lorimer stresses the importance of 'thinking through locally formative interventions in the world' (83) where the focus is on:

> how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. (83)

This interest in a localised, subjective, affective, and embodied response to place has much in common with the calls within island studies for phenomenological investigations, performative geographies, and practice-based approaches, as well as chiming with the archipelagic perspectives described in section III. The result in cultural geography has been a broadening of possibilities for the scope and tone of geographical writing and the raising of general questions about the status of narrative in comparison with other forms of discourse. There is also a significant overlap with the more explicitly environmental concerns of ecocriticism. Stephen Daniels and Lorimer ask: 'What might it mean to posit a formal equivalence between scientific and literary accounts of nature and environmental process and change?' (2012: 5).

In fact, the literary works of Robinson and Sebald have been identified as being of interest beyond the sphere of literary criticism, since they represent, in John Wylie's view, 'active contributions to contemporary geographical thinking, practice and theorization' (2012: 366). Indeed, Wylie suggests that even the augmented approaches to place outlined above fail to do justice to the extraordinary complexity of self/world interaction articulated by these writers. In his 2007 essay on Sebald's work, 'The Spectral Geographies of W.G. Sebald', Wylie brings into play Jacques Derrida's ideas of spectrality, haunting and the revenance of the ghostly, foregrounding the idea that what is *not* present in place may be as powerful to the perceiver as what *is* present. Likewise, he feels that in Tim Robinson's work, place is characterised by 'absence and distance' as 'constitutive elements of landscape' (2012: 367). These perceptions seem to move us beyond even Massey's porous,

[7] This, as Lorimer's own use of 'more-than-human' suggests, echoes the eco-philosopher David Abrams' formulation of 'more-than-human' to replace 'nonhuman' (1996) – a term that subtly reverses traditional hierarchies of being in its suggestion of a 'greater-than-human' world. Lorimer's use of the phrase hints at a correspondence between cultural geography and the more specifically environmental perspectives of ecocriticism, a correspondence that is made more explicit in 'Until the end of days: narrating landscape and environment' (Daniels and Lorimer, 2012).

open and socially-inflected model of place, since the absences and hauntings they evoke cannot necessarily be easily established within a network of social relations.

Although I do not adopt Wylie's Derridean, ghostly interpretation, taking instead a material perspective, I do follow his lead in investigating the notions of absence and distance and the concept of the presence of what is not there as constitutive elements of certain responses to place. I also note the apparent collapse of linear time and concurrence of 'different presents' (Evans 2008: 126) expressed in the island texts studied here. The powerful sense of this concurrent time further complicates place, as do the associative qualities that lead (as I describe in Chapter 3, in relation to Sebald's evocation of Auschwitz in the landscape of Orford Ness) to the transposition of one place onto another. These elements suggest that island place may be not so much a 'particular moment' (Massey 1994: 5), as many co-present moments, in which relations, both contemporaneous and historical, personal and social, are exponentially multiplied.

The general reassessment of discourse in cultural geography begins to accord forms of writing more usually associated with the personal, the affective, and the literary more purchase—more validity, perhaps—within traditionally scientific disciplines, and perhaps strengthens the argument that island studies might fruitfully engage further with non-empirical works. In the following section I outline perspectives that have a direct bearing on the consideration of the form and content of island and coastal writings.

III. Archipelagic perspectives

Recent years have seen the development of archipelagic perspectives in creative and critical work in the literature of the British and Irish archipelago. While the movement shares with the archipelagraphy of island studies a keen interest in mapping interconnections between islands and islands, coasts and coasts, it perhaps diverges slightly from the archipelagic interests of island studies in its particular focus on forms of landscape writing and their intersections with British and Irish devolutionary politics. The movement can be traced to two important way-points. The first is the launch of the creative writing journal *Archipelago* in the summer of 2007, and the second is the publication in 2008 of John Kerrigan's influential critical work *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603 - 1707.* In his editorial to *Archipelago 1*, Andrew McNeillie, the founder and editor, set out a manifesto for the journal listing its preoccupations, which are

> with landscape, with documentary and remembrance, with wilderness and wet, with natural and cultural histories, with language and languages, with the littoral and the vestigial, the geological and topographical, with climates, in terms of both meteorology, ecology and environment; and all these things as metaphor, liminal and subliminal, at the margins, in the unnameable constellation of islands on the Eastern Atlantic coast, known variously in other millennia as Britain, Great Britain, Britain and Ireland etc […]. (2007: vii)

This manifesto echoes the concerns of island studies in its championing of local identity as a form of resistance to imperialist (and continental) impositions and globalising homogenisations, seen here through McNeillie's refusal to adopt the various politically-loaded namings of the 'unnameable' archipelago, and through the manifesto's promulgation of an extraordinary attentiveness to the local.

In fact, for Jos Smith, the most significant achievement of archipelagic writing is the way in which it addresses the problem, also identified by Hay within island studies, of balancing a deep regard for local identity while maintaining the self-reflexivity and openness to ideas of flux and hybridity that might enable it to avoid accusations of a more conservative localism. Taking up Arif Dirlik's notion of 'critical localism' (1999), Smith proposes his own version: of archipelagic writing as performing a radical 'act of resistance to the dual unifying narratives of Great Britain and globalisation' and offering 'a critical form of the local that is slippery, creative and progressive' (unpublished thesis, 2012: 6). The immensely detailed, localised attentiveness implied by this kind of writing, as well as resisting elements of globalisation, is also seen as providing a perspective on global (and particularly, ecological) processes, again, much as island studies has envisaged the function of islandness. McNeillie includes in his journal manifesto the statement: 'But while the unnameable archipelago is its subject, its vision is by implication global, and its concerns with the state of the planet could not be more of the hour' (2007: vii). These concerns with the state of the planet emerge subtly through the small—but profound—moments of ecological and social-ecological insight that are revealed when landscape is given the sort of detailed attention *Archipelago* promotes. While Smith suggests that 'archipelagic literature' (2012: 5), given its attentiveness to the complex intertwinings of nature, culture and place, may be a better term than 'new nature writing' for contemporary place-based writing in general, it perhaps attains a heightened relevance when applied to specifically island-based literature.

John Kerrigan's *Archipelagic English* similarly resists misleading paradigms of national identity, challenging the Anglo-centric connotations of the term 'English Literature'. Taking as its starting point the way in which devolutionary aspects of 21st

century politics draw attention to distortions in the historical presentation of the relationships between the constituent nations (specifically during the seventeenth century), Kerrigan proposes a more nuanced, complex paradigm which embraces distinctive local, bioregional and national identities but also explores the transnational relationships and criss-crossings of the archipelago which he believes are characteristic of the 'devolutionary and interactive dynamics' (2008: 11) of a field which is 'expansive, multilevelled, discontinuous, and polycentric' (82). The devolutionary aspect of archipelagic writing is clearly a significant one, all the more so in the context of the contemporary and ongoing political reshapings of this unnameable archipelago. However, it is not a theme that takes centre stage in the texts studied in this thesis, and my archipelagic reading of them focuses predominantly on the attentiveness they bring to their island worlds and the ways in which interconnections between those islands and places elsewhere emerge.

John Brannigan's *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles 1890 - 1970* (2014), a very recent contribution to archipelagic thinking, represents the beginnings of archipelagic criticism's engagement with island studies. Brannigan cites Baldacchino and discusses Hay's 2006 essay. He is broadly sympathetic to Hay's frustrations with literary tropes of islandness, but suggests that the texts studied in *Archipelagic Modernism* reveal a surprising degree of engagement with materiality. He argues that

> despite the general cultural tendency towards seeing islands and seas in figurative terms, there has been a strong counter-tradition in twentieth-century Anglophone literature, perhaps especially in that modernist and late-modernist literature associated with symbolism and metaphorical modes of representation, of reading them from resolutely material perspectives. (2014: 9-10)

Alexandra Campbell identifies this counter-tradition (and Brannigan's discussion of it) as the 'greening of modernism' (2015: 125), thus implicitly linking its concerns with ecocriticism.

Brannigan also makes a contribution to the greening of aquapelagic thought. With parallels to DeLoughrey's notion that the myth of island 'isolates' has contributed to the legitimisation of the use of Pacific islands for nuclear testing, Brannigan argues that

> Thinking of the sea as a 'free space', without consequences, whether for waste dumping, overfishing, or most recently hydraulic fracture drilling, is clearly a major contributory factor in the environmental and social crises of our age. (2014: 13)

Brannigan's book, then, sets a precedent for the study involved in this thesis, with the welcome suggestion that the island literature of these isles has historically been

underpinned by an attention to the materiality of islands and seas as well as to their symbolic potential. This correspondence brings us to discussion of ecocriticism itself.

IV. Ecocriticism: approaching the posthuman

The first professional organisation of ecocritics, the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), was founded in the US in 1992, with the publication of its journal, *ISLE*: *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* commencing in 1993. A sister organisation was set up in the UK in 1998 (now encompassing the UK and Ireland), with its own publication, the journal *Green Letters*, first published in 2000. In the intervening years the discipline has become a global forum for discussion of the intersections between culture and environment, with eight affiliate organisations worldwide listed on the ASLE website. Hailed by Richard Kerridge as 'environmentalism's overdue move beyond science, geography and social science into "the humanities"' (1998: 5), ecocriticism explores 'the representation in literature (and other cultural forms) of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, largely from the perspective of anxieties around humanity's destructive impact on the biosphere' (Marland 2013: 846). It is underpinned by the conviction, articulated by Lawrence Buell (1995), that cultural conceptualisations and representations of humans and our place in the world have played a role in the formation and perpetuation of behaviours that have proved damaging to 'the earth's life support systems' (Glotfelty 1996: xvi), and it involves, at least for praxis-oriented ecocritics, the search for more earth-friendly ways of imaging our being-in-the-world.

Much like island studies, which began with a perceived need to create a platform for the discussion of islands, ecocriticism was spurred on in its inception by the desire to open up a critical space in which to talk about the natural, or 'more-than-human' (Abram 1996), world. Again, like island studies, it has developed rapidly from its early formulations to the point at which it should now be considered as an umbrella term for a host of different critical approaches, rather than a discipline that has a single set of beliefs and methodologies. In the paragraphs that follow I give an account of the specific aspects of ecocritical thought that I have drawn upon (and offer amendments to) in my investigation of island literature. At the heart of the thesis' critical methodology is ecocriticism's commitment to discussing the 'real thing' (Soper 1995: 151), the 'general physical presence' (Gifford 1995: 15) that both plays into and exceeds cultural constructions of 'nature'. As Laurence Coupe suggests, 'green studies debates "Nature" in

order to defend nature' (2000: 5). This resonates powerfully with Hay's ambition of 'rescuing the real' (2006: 26), and the remit of island studies in general to keep the island as a *locus* in view even while exploring it as a *focus*. Indeed Coupe's statement might be paraphrased in this context as 'island studies debates "islandness" in order to defend islands'.

In keeping with a desire to reassert the importance of engaging with the 'real' world, the first wave of ecocriticism[8] in the US involved the promotion of nature writing as an exemplar of what Lawrence Buell calls 'environmentally-oriented' literature (1995: 7). Buell created the following checklist to guide ecocritical reading:

> 1. *The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.* […]
> 2. *The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.* […]
> 3. *Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation* […]
> 4. *Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.* […]. (1995: 7-8, italics in original)

While these criteria date to the inception of ecocriticism, they remain relevant, albeit supplemented and amended by more recent perspectives, even when applied to literary genres other than nature writing, and provide a basic methodology for the analysis of island-based texts in this thesis.

As the checklist above suggests, a major preoccupation of ecocriticism is the question of what it means to be a human in the world, what it means to 'dwell' upon the earth. Early ecocritical formulations of dwelling owe much to Martin Heidegger's mobilisation of the concept of 'Dasein', his related thoughts on 'being-in-the-world' (2010 [1953]: 61), and his reflections on poetry that suggest that this form may be able to 'presence' the nature of our being-in-the-world (2001 [1971]). Bate interprets this Heideggerian dwelling as connoting 'an authentic form of being' (2000: 261) that works in opposition to 'the false ontologies of Cartesian dualism and subjective idealism' (261). For Bate, it also implies a life 'grounded in regional particularity' (234). He cites Thomas Hardy to argue that 'those who truly dwell […] are attuned to collective memory, to 'old association—an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon'' (18). Likewise, Bate contends that for the poet Ted Hughes, 'dwelling with the earth is a matter of *staying put* and *listening in*' (29, emphasis in original).

[8] For a full account of the 'waves' of ecocriticism, see Marland (2013).

This notion of consistent localised dwelling is one that has been adopted (though not uncritically) in ecocriticism as a whole. Garrard, for example, states: '"Dwelling" is not a transient state; rather, it implies the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work' (2012a: 117). However, as with the debates over island identities, the notion of dwelling as equating to long-term imbrication and staying put jars with the contemporary widespread movement of peoples and cultural hybridity, and in its Romantic leanings perhaps reflects an unachievable—and perhaps ideologically problematic[9]—ideal of being-in-the-world. Notwithstanding these necessary and useful critiques, I would argue that the concept of dwelling, if it is seen as encompassing the question of what it means to be a mortal human upon the earth, remains a vital area of investigation, particularly, as I go on to argue, when combined with the 'critical analysis of the term "human"' (Garrard 2012a: 5) that characterises contemporary ecocriticism.

The tension between concepts of long-term imbrication and postmodern fluidity bring to the fore once again the difficulty of mediating between the local and the global. Ursula Heise, like Doreen Massey with her 'global sense of the local, […] global sense of place' (1994: 156), suggests that the challenge for the environmental imagination is to formulate approaches 'in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on ties to territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole' (2008: 10). Heise identifies scepticism 'vis-à-vis local rootedness' (5) as a vital element in the search for the countermodels to the kind of nation-based concepts of identity that impede the development of 'ecocosmopolitanism' (10). She sees this scepticism as instrumental in fostering new conceptualisations that validate 'individual and collective forms of identity that define themselves in relation to a multiplicity of places and place experiences' (5). Again, this expanded understanding speaks to the more outward-looking, archipelagic and aquapelagic models of islandness being proposed in island studies.

The planetary scale that Heise invokes is perhaps indicative more generally of the vastness and complexity of ecocriticism's object of study. As Timothy Clark points out, 'The "environment", after all, is, ultimately, "everything"' (2011: 203). Furthermore, he argues that 'to try to conceptualise and engage the multiple factors behind the accelerating degradation of the planet is to reach for tools which must be remade even in the process of

[9] The Heideggerian model has, for example, been tarnished by its association with the 'blood and soil' (Bramwell 1985) mentality of Nazi Germany, casting doubts on its validity and value for the environmental movement.

use' (xiii). The phenomena with which environmentalists and ecocritics alike are currently grappling conceptually have effects that are ultimately registered on a planetary scale, for example, 'climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, biomagnification, deforestation, the radioactive aftermaths of wars, acidifying oceans' (Nixon 2011: 2). The implications of these markers of the Anthropocene,[10] confound existing epistemologies and ontologies and call, ever more urgently, for new ways of imaging and understanding. However, 'thinking big' as Timothy Morton recommends (2010: 14) is not without its difficulties. Clark, for example, talks of the 'derangements of scale' (2012: 148) that occur when we try to make sense of the massive discrepancy between space and time as experienced by individual humans, and the spatial and temporal dimensions implied by climate change. This apparent impasse is perhaps where literature has a role to play: as Axel Goodbody argues, 'literature frames our notions of the natural environment in a continuous process of adapting and reformulating existing frames and proposing new ones' (2012: 23). It is also an area in which island-based literature might have a particularly significant role to play, given the heightened intimacy with the natural world and connection with more-than-human scales that island life seems to provide.

If literature does offer alternative vectors for understanding the environment and the human place within it, then it follows that ecocriticism also needs to find new frameworks for the study of that literature. In fact, recent years have seen an extraordinarily creative period for ecocritical theory, as it has fruitfully engaged with a range of developments in contemporary thought and forged approaches that can be broadly termed posthumanist. Posthumanism interrogates the 'human' and challenges the Enlightenment tradition of the Great Chain of Being which places us in a privileged position in the hierarchy of life on earth. It

> forces us to rethink our taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself, by recontextualising them in terms of the entire sensorium of other living beings and their own autopoietic ways of 'bringing forth a world'. (Wolfe 2010: xxv)

Similarly, Derrida directs our attention to 'the heterogeneous multiplicity of the living' (2002: 399) in which the human is just one of many species. In an early discussion of the implications of posthumanist thought for ecocriticism, Louise Westling borrows Derrida's term, formulating the phrase '*animot* posthumanism', which calls for both a de-centering of the human and an emphasis on our imbrication in the 'matrix of earth's life' (2006: 26).

[10] An informal term for the current geological epoch (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000).

Perspectives such as these radically diminish the stature of the human and signal a rejection of anthropocentric perspectives, potentially representing something of a clash with the focus of island studies. As we have seen, Hay sees island 'identity' as being wholly bound up with its human inhabitants, fearing the loss of island memory 'as the last intermediate-term resident swings away on the global roundabout' (2006: 24). In *The Song of the Earth,* Bate argues that 'In our twenty-first century, we need to treasure the memory or the myth of an island which Prospero has left, an ecosystem which man is content to leave alone' (2000: 93). Though Bate's 'myth' is likely to remain just that, given the extent of anthropogenic impact upon the biosphere, there is certainly a sense in which ecocriticism, particularly from a biocentric perspective, might be interested in islands from which the last human residents of *any* kind have swung away, and indeed, some of the islands studied in this thesis (particularly in Chapter 4) no longer support human communities. All of the islands discussed are celebrated for the richness of their flora and fauna, with some attaining official status as National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest, such that their 'identity' might be seen as resting predominantly with their topography and nonhuman inhabitants.

Ongoing formulations of posthumanist ecocriticism have been much influenced by the 'material turn' in areas such as philosophy, anthropology and feminist science studies. The 'new materialisms' emphasise the immersion of the human and the nonhuman in the 'onto-tale' (Bennett 2010: 118) of matter. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost state, 'We live our everyday lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter. We are ourselves composed of matter' (2010: 1). They also argue that '"matter becomes" rather than "matter is"' (10): that all matter, human and nonhuman, living and non-living, has an inherent vitality, with diverse phenomena involved in 'intra-actions' (Barad 2008: 128), and 'choreographies of becoming' (Coole and Frost 2010: 10). These new materialisms have drawn upon the earlier work of thinkers who have been responsible for challenging the conceptual divisions between areas previously considered as separate, such as the biological and the political, the nonhuman and the human, the natural and the cultural. They have provided us with useful concepts for articulating the blurring of these conceptual boundaries, for example, 'naturecultures', in which 'layers of history [and] layers of biology' are intertwined (Haraway 2003: 1), and 'assemblages' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004; DeLanda 2006)—'heterogeneous associations that include […] human and nonhuman elements' (Latour 1999: 165).

The attractions of the 'new materialisms' for ecocriticism are manifold. The untethering of agency from its conceptual ties with human intentionality is a move that opens our eyes to the creative power of the nonhuman world, and brings about a corollary reassessment of the human itself. As Coole and Frost argue,

> Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization and directedness, and thus no longer as simply passive and inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature. (10)

The revelation of the agentic potential of all matter not only disrupts our sense of the autonomous human subject, but also brings sharply to our attention the folly of perpetuating binary human/nature distinctions. Stacy Alaimo, pursuing 'a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments' (2012: 476), has developed the concepts of 'trans-corporeality' (2008: 238) and 'deviant agencies' (2010: 139) to articulate the way in which matter—sometimes highly toxic matter—crosses indiscriminately into environments and bodies within 'networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial' (Alaimo 2012: 476).

These ideas have been brought together and theorised further in the emergent field of 'material ecocriticism', an area of ecocriticism conceptualised and articulated primarily by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann. They note that there are a number of 'autonomous ecocritical pathways' (2014: 11) involved in the development of this area. One strand is characterised by approaches that might be seen as partaking of a biocentric, and hence, perhaps, 'deep ecological' perspective that involves a 'biospherical egalitarianism' (Naess 1973: 95), in which the interest of the biosphere overrides the interests of individual species, including the human. Thus material ecocriticism emphasises 'agential kinships' (Iovino 2012: 66), and looks to foster an 'ecological horizontalism and extended moral imagination' (52). The eco-philosopher David Abram has been influential here, particularly in the ways in which he has developed ecophenomenological perspectives adapted from the writings of Edmund Husserl and, especially, Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[11] As a concept, phenomenology has been used in a range of disciplines (including island studies, cultural geography and ecocriticism), as a kind of shorthand for approaches that maintain a sensuous openness to 'that-which-would-

[11] Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology as 'a disclosure of the world' (2002: xxiii), emphasising the primacy of perception and the centrality of the body as fundamental aspects of that disclosure.

be-known' (Hay 2006: 33). For Abram it implies that we as humans should tune 'our animal senses to the sensible terrain' (2010: 3) and participate in the 'breathing flesh of the world' (2010: 38). As such, and as Westling states,

> We are no longer alone as transcendent Minds locked in decaying bodies on an Earth where we don't belong and separate from the myriad creatures around us. Now we can see ourselves as vibrant bodies pulsing in harmony with our whole environment. (2006: 36)

The adoption of phenomenology has also assisted in the reassessment of concepts such as mind and language, disrupting the way in which these have tended to be exclusively associated with the human. Merleau-Ponty argues that 'our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other "objects" the miracle of expression' (2002: 230). Hence, Abram argues that 'mind is a luminous quality of the earth' (2010: 132), and language immanent everywhere in an 'articulate landscape' (173), and we as humans dwell 'within a community of expressive presences that are also attentive and listening, to the meanings that move between them' (173). The notion of this immanent intelligence and expressiveness clearly disrupts the notion that 'language' (or, as Harrison writes, *logos*) is unique to humans. Iovino and Oppermann point out the significance for material ecocriticism of biosemiotic perspectives (2014: 4-5), which argue that, '*all* life—from the cell all the way up to us—is characterized by communication or semiosis' (Wheeler 2011: 270), and that 'the natural world is perfused with signs, meanings and purposes which are material and which evolve' (279). Given the status of the islands studied in this thesis as protected sites for flora and fauna, their respective literatures may be particularly rich sites for the exploration of such ecophenomenological and biosemiotic approaches.

As already noted, this ecophenomenological strand of material ecocriticism has leanings that might be identified with deep ecology. However, as we have seen, material ecocriticism also engages with the more dissonant implications of a world of vital matter. Notions of the 'deviant agencies' (Alaimo 2010: 139) of toxic substances, and complex naturalcultural intertwinings such as 'electric grids, polluting substances, chemicals, energy, assemblages, scientific apparatuses, cyborgs, waste' (Iovino 2012: 52) hint at more challenging elements, and suggest perspectives that might be seen as 'social ecological'[12]—i.e. as recognising a profound connection between the oppression of peoples and the degradation of landscapes— in the fullest sense, since they recognise no

[12] A perspective based on the belief that destructive anthropogenic impact upon the nonhuman world originates in hierarchical social systems which have 'projected the domination of human by human into an ideology that "man" is destined to dominate "Nature"' (Bookchin 2005: 65).

distinction between the social and the biological. Jane Bennett, whose 2010 work *Vibrant Matter* has had a major influence on the development of material ecocriticism (see Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 11) stresses that 'in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, my monism [i.e. her material ontology] posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit' (2010: ix). Thus, we are also faced with the task of responding to the darker phenomenologies of island life, to pollutants, and to storied matter, the narratives of which tangle the historical, the political, and the biological in ways that resist easy articulation. Iovino and Oppermann suggest two approaches, which can perhaps be regarded as representing the two strands delineated above, through which matter's stories might be investigated:

> The first one focuses on the way matter's (or nature's) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual); the second way focuses on matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. (2012: 79)

The research that follows brings these ideas of the agentic capacity and narrative power of matter to bear on the island texts under consideration, particularly in Chapters 2 and 3. It also investigates the potential limits of these concepts. Hannes Bergthaller has questioned how far the notion of agency can be taken in the context of ecocriticism, suggesting that

> in their effort to overturn the old anthropocentric and mechanistic ontologies, they [the new materialists] have pushed into the background the problem of how sharp ontological and ethical distinctions can emerge *immanently,* as a result of material self-organization. (2014: 40, emphasis in original)

Bergthaller argues that the theory of *autopoeisis,* put forward by the biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, and developed via social systems theory and second-order cybernetics by Niklas Luhmann, provides us with a means of understanding how the ontological and ethical distinctions he mentions might arise, since it demonstrates the way in which systems, while open to flows of energy, are ultimately operationally closed (see also Bergthaller 2011). Anna Stenning worries that the material 'kinship' outlined by Iovino and Opperman represents a 'neo-vitalism that would prevent us [humans] from taking responsibility for our influences on the planet' (2016: 218). These reservations— both of which gesture, albeit with different emphases, towards an ongoing scrutiny of specifically human systems— are taken into account in the application of perspectives drawn from material ecocriticism throughout the thesis.

As already noted, aspects of the 'material turn' are already making their mark upon island studies, for example in Baldacchino and Clark's summation of islandness as encompassing 'flows of matter and energy' (2013: 130) and as 'a set of moments of assemblage, of connective tissue, mobilities and multiplicities' (130). Given the emergence of these more fluid and multiple accounts, it is perhaps difficult to see where any specific sense of islandness might yet adhere. The incorporation of the new materialisms into emerging strands of ecocriticism has also resulted in a burgeoning of creative theory, but, again, perhaps has yet to be fully incorporated into the practices of ecocriticism. I would argue that these correspondences signal the potential for the bringing together of these two disciplines. Ecocriticism is in a strong position to bring to literary island writing the kind of investigations that correspond with developments in island studies as a whole, and might perhaps, through the application of these approaches, reveal aspects of islandness that have as yet been largely unexplored. It might help to articulate a new strand of research in island studies and thus, as Stratford *et al* (2011) hope, provide a viewing platform from which to perceive and analyse islands afresh and anew. Reciprocally, the qualities of islandness that emerge in the chapters that follow might in turn render island literature a particularly rich site for exploring the value and robustness of aspects of contemporary ecocritical theory.

Before outlining the content of the thesis chapters, I now look briefly at the legacy of literary accounts of islands and discuss some of the critical perspectives that have been brought to their study.

'Islands of the mind': the literary legacy

Robert James Berry, in his foreword to the Collins New Naturalist book *Islands*, confesses that he has tried to write in an 'appropriately sober style' (2009: ix), hoping to transmit 'a sensible scientific message' (ix) but that the 'excitement and magic of real islands' (ix) has kept interrupting him. He also states that his 'first islands were fictional' (x) and include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. The anecdote suggests that even apparently empirical works that take islands as their subject are likely to have been influenced—perhaps profoundly infiltrated—by imaginative constructions of islandness, and that the excitement of real and of fictional islands may have much in common. Edna Longley argues that Scottish and Irish island poems are all 'pre-troped by the *Odyssey* and its offshoots' (2010: 144). One might perhaps expand this comment to encompass Western island writings of any kind. It is difficult to be completely

untouched by the tropes of islandness that have been conjured so powerfully over the centuries by Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and a host of other island-themed works. Islands are, then, from the start 'naturalcultural', to use Haraway's term, their empirical representations coloured by more explicitly imaginative accounts.

The kinds of tropes and metaphors to which island literature has given rise are manifold and well-documented, but worth looking at here briefly in order to understand the broad cultural pre-troping of the island literature studied in this thesis. The tropes are typically listed in terms of opposing binaries, immediately mirroring Harrison's delineation of the forest's cultural enframing, and supporting Baldacchino and Clark's sense of 'dizzying oscillations' (2013: 129). They include utopia/dystopia; paradise/prison; Eden/Hell; generative spaces/islands of death; places of spiritual transformation/sites of savagery; fully-formed microcosms of ideal societies/tabulae rasae upon which our ideas can be imprinted; sites of discovery/sites of experimentation, and so on. All of these can be found in literary island-themed works (though there is not space here to trace their lineage) firmly establishing a precedent for thinking of islands as, for example, places of adventure; of transformative possibility, both individual and communal; of punishment and imprisonment; of renewal and creativity. It also appears that these tropes, once established, are ever-present and can surface at any time in island writings. Gillian Beer argues that even as our knowledge and its accompanying metaphors develop, the traces of older conceptualisations remain, so that the 'island' becomes ever more complex. She argues: 'A term may inhabit very different intellectual-historical periods simultaneously within a specific reader' (1989: 6), and history is 'less linear than constellatory' (6). Likewise, 'island' is constellatory, and its constellation is constantly enlarged by further writings of the island. Beer continues: 'Past writing is always part of the present day, newly-inflected by being read and lived within fresh circumstances' (7).

The writers studied in this thesis all demonstrate an awareness of pre-existing conceptualisations of the island, each one at some point deploying the kind of tropes listed above, and they all allude to or reference a range of island texts (indeed they sometimes refer to each other's work) in a kind of archipelagic intertextuality. Their writings are certainly coloured to some degree by the most influential literary evocations of islands, and figures such as Odysseus, Prospero, Caliban, Gulliver and Crusoe stalk their pages. Thus, without exception, they find themselves in a position in which they must assess and respond to both the broader tropes of islandness and those specific to their own particular

islands. In the course of the research for this thesis it has been necessary to bear these tropes and metaphors in mind and to reveal their traces in the texts. At the same time I have striven to remain alert to the interplay between the physical islands and their imaginative constructions: in other words I have tried to bear in mind Rigby's sense of the pre-conceptual power of place, and to maintain a naturalcultural perspective that allows for the entanglement of the real and the imagined in the genesis of these metaphors.

Even in early island writings, the real and the mythical are difficult to separate. Pliny the Elder's first century AD description of the Britannias repeats Pytheas' sighting of an island far to the north of the Orkneys that he thought was 'the edge of the world (*Ultima Thule*)' (Berry 2009: 2). Similarly, the island of *Hy Brazil*, 'first appeared on an Anglo-Saxon map of about 993 as a huge island west of Ireland' (Berry 2009: 5), not being removed from charts till 1873 (5), and accounts of its sighting were recorded (for example, see Cunliffe 2001: 14). Both of these islands were entirely mythical, encouraging a conceptualisation of islands as sites of fantastic possibility. It is a perception that has perhaps played into the association of islands with spirituality. The medieval *peregrini*—the spiritual pilgrims who settled along the Atlantic littoral in the years of Celtic Christianity—saw the crossing to an island as both a literal and a metaphorical liminal act (Wooding 2010b), the means of passing from one place to another but also from one state of being to another. They also, as Macfarlane notes, wanted 'to achieve correspondence between belief and place, between inner and outer landscapes' (2008: 24). These observations frame islands both as sites of personal transformation and as places in which an intense reciprocity between self and world might be experienced.

It is perhaps this sense of transformative possibility that has fed into the notion of an ideal island—the island Eden or the island utopia. Grove (1995) notes that in the 15th century the idea that the biblical Eden might have been an island led to seagoing quests to discover the site of the fabled garden. More's *Utopia* (1516), as its title suggests, is the site of an imaginary, ideal organisation of society. Further utopian texts appeared in the 17th Century: Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627) and Henry Neville's *The Isle of Pines* (1668), again, both set on islands. Part of the rationale for the location of these imaginary states is the perceived isolation and insularity of the islands, which keeps them separate from contamination by less ideal social orders: 'each [text] is insistent on the separation of its nation from its immediate neighbours, and from the rest of the known world' (Bruce, 1999: ix). In fact, the ruler of More's Utopia, King Utopus, actually physically alters the topography of his kingdom by digging away the spit of land that makes it a peninsula and

joins it to a continental landmass, ensuring that it is finally entirely surrounded by water: bounded, literally and metaphorically. For More, then, the presence or lack of a physical connection to the mainland radically alters an island's conceptual status—a view, as we saw in Barthon's discussion of the bridged island, that still holds weight.

As Hay notes, much of the critical work carried out on literary island writing has been in the area of postcolonial criticism, and two texts—*Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest*—have been at the heart of critiques of the literary trope of the island, with DeLoughrey describing them as 'island colonisation narratives' (2011: 3). Diana Loxley identifies *Robinson Crusoe* as the blueprint for island imperialism and traces its influence on nineteenth century texts[13] as well as a whole host of post-1719 reworkings of the island shipwreck narrative, all bearing such an integral relationship to *Robinson Crusoe* that they have been dubbed the 'Robinsonnades' (Loxley 1990: 3-5). The cultural import of *Crusoe* is such that it could be argued that it underlies and influences *all* the post-1719 island literature of the British and Irish archipelago (and beyond),[14] not just those texts that Loxley identifies, and that every subsequent island work (at least if it is written from an outsider perspective) has this novel as part of its conceptual backdrop, and so is, in some sense, a Robinsonnade.

However, while it is important to remain alert to any traces of imperialist thought in more contemporary writings of the island, we have already seen evidence that the potential exists for new inflections of existing tropes. DeLoughrey (2007) notes that *The Tempest* has been reworked by postcolonial island authors such as Aimé Césaire, whose *Une Tempête* (1969) presents Caliban as a figure of resistance to Prospero's European colonialism. Rob Nixon suggests that during the period 1957 – 1973 Caribbean and African writers seized upon the play both as 'as a way of amplifying their calls for decolonization within the bounds of dominant cultures' (1986: 558) and 'as a founding text in an oppositional lineage' (558), perceiving that it could 'contribute to their self-definition in a period of great flux' (558). There is a sense here that the tropes of island are, like islandness itself, unstable and fluid, and receptive to reframing. Perhaps, then, there is the potential for a reworking of the Robinsonnade, particularly in the context of contemporary,

[13] These include Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island*; Johann David Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson;* Frederick Marryat's *Masterman Ready*; R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.

[14] The Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, cited by DeLoughrey, speaks of the influence of *Robinson Crusoe* on the literature of the *Mundo Nuevo,* referring to it as 'our first book, our profane Genesis' (DeLoughrey 2001: 22).

archipelagic island writing, which implies both a resistance to dominant colonising and globalising forces and a passionate attentiveness to what is already contained within the island space. DeLoughrey associates the narratives of the colonial island with 'the islands' presumed lack of culture and history' (2001: 23), but the writers in this thesis are drawn to islands for precisely the opposite reason—for their rich culture and history. It is also interesting to note the prevalence of the notion of 'pilgrimage' in some of these texts. The first of Robinson's Aran texts is entitled *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* and Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* was subtitled in the German original *Eine englische Wallfahrt—An English Pilgrimage*, a concept denoting not so much colonisation as supplication.

In fact, the idea that islands have their own significant stories to tell was a factor in the flowering of island-related culture in the early years of the 20th century, when traditional island ways of life and heritage languages seemed on the point of disappearing for ever. Synge's *The Aran Islands* (1907) marked the beginning of a modernist preoccupation with islands, as noted by John Brannigan (2014), which resulted in a host of 1930s island writings and films.[15] It was not necessarily the case, however, that the islands were portrayed faithfully and exactly in these accounts. Robert Flaherty's 'pseudo-documentary' (Pilný 2004: 228) *Man of Aran* (1934), for example, has been accused of romanticising primitive island life (see O'Brien 2004). In a sense the islands were at this time once again relegated to the status of symbol more than actuality, so that the Aran islands became the focus for a politically motivated construct of the Celtic soul (Robinson 1992). Similarly, the Shiants were for Compton Mackenzie, who was the owner of the islands between 1925 and 1937, and whose two-part novel *The North Wind of Love* (1944-5) is set there, 'a talisman of Scotland' (Linklater 1987, cited in Nicolson 2002: 342). At the same time, however, this period also saw the publication of narratives of island life written by islanders themselves, emanating, in particular, from the Irish Blasket Islands,[16] which paid tribute to a life which was, in effect, dying out.[17] The aura of valediction in these works reflected a growing association in the course of the 20th century of islands with 'a sense of loss rather than promise' (Edmond and Smith 2003: 8). The withdrawing of the tide of humanity from the small islands around the British and Irish archipelago, and

[15] Ronald Lockley documented islands off the Welsh coast in works including *Dream Island* (1930), *Island Days* (1934) and *I Know an Island* (1938); Robert Flaherty filmed the immensely influential *Man of Aran* (1934), which sparked Tim Robinson's interest in the island in the 1970s (Robinson 2008 [1985]: 16); and Michael Powell made *The Edge of the World* (1937).

[16] For example, Tomás O'Crohan (*The Islandman,* 1929), Maurice O'Sullivan (*Twenty Years A-Growing,* 1933*),* and Peig Sayers (*Peig,* 1936).

[17] Great Blasket was finally evacuated in 1953 (Royle 2001).

the resulting discourses of loss, feature in the discussion of the outliers of the Outer Hebrides in Chapter 4.

Having looked briefly at some of the island texts that form the constellation of tropes of islandness it is perhaps also useful to turn our focus onto those who write island texts, and the question of what might inspire their attempts to 'write the island'. Macfarlane observes that 'small islands have often inspired dreams of total knowledge in those who love them' (2012a: 111), fostering attempt to describe islands 'in their entirety' in works of island literature. Another enticement is the sense of identification between self and island. For Bill Holm, 'islands are necessary for us to be able to think about what is true at the bottom of our own character; we need to reduce the world for a while, to count it and understand it' (2000: 11-12), a notion that has perhaps played out most strongly in the Rousseauistic trope—dating back to Rousseau's description of the Île Saint-Pierre in the 'Fifth Walk' of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (2011 [1782])—of 'islands as havens for the solitary recluse' (Baldacchino 2011: 106). In his 1978 non-fiction work *Islands*, John Fowles extends this notion further, writing of how deeply islands 'can haunt and form the personal as well as the public imagination' (1978: 12). 'In terms of consciousness, and self-consciousness,' Fowles writes, 'every individual human *is* an island, in spite of Donne's famous preaching to the contrary' (12). He goes on:

> It is the boundedness of the smaller island, encompassable in a glance, walkable in one day, that relates it to the human body closer than any other geographical conformation of land. It is also the contrast between what can be seen at once and what remains, beyond the shore that faces us, hidden. Even to ourselves we are the same, half superficial and obvious, and half concealed, labyrinthine, fascinating to explore. Then there is the enisling sea, our evolutionary amniotic fluid, the element in which we too were once enwombed, from which our own antediluvian line rose into the light and air. There is the marked individuality of islands, which we should like to think corresponds with our own; their obstinate separatedness of character, even when they lie in archipelagos. (1978: 12)

This is a significant passage since it crystallises some of the key qualities of islandness that might encourage an ecocritical reading: a sense of close identification between self and world, human and landscape; the importance of the body in the perception of the island space; the individuality of islands; the sense that island identity is complex and labyrinthine and encourages the corresponding investigation of the labyrinth of the human self. These observations resonate with the concerns of this thesis in several ways. In Chapter 1, for example, Robinson's exploration of the island interior in *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* is accompanied by an investigation, at times, of his own inner world.

The assumed congruence of self and island is, however, also fraught with problematic implications. Beer suggests that it begins with the very term 'island', with the sounded 'I' at the beginning of the word causing a 'habituating consonance between the ego and the island' (1989: 15). She warns: 'It is no accident that first-person narrative is so frequent in literature of the island: the inner and the outer are dangerously akin in solitude' (10), and she suggests that through this identification, the island comes to be regarded as the 'experimental site', the tabula rasa on which the protagonist can inscribe his identity, much as she feels Crusoe does upon his island. She also suggests that this 'tight fit of island to individual' is related in some way to the association of island with gestation (Beer 1990: 271), which once again reinforces the association of the island with the individual ego. This idea certainly resonates with Fowles' evocation of the 'amniotic fluid' of the sea and the correspondence he sees between 'the marked individuality of islands' (1978: 12) and our own.

The danger of the association of the 'I-land' and the ego is one that found powerful literary articulation in D. H. Lawrence's 'The Man Who Loved Islands'. This short story is, according to Nicolson, a 'scarcely veiled attack on [Compton] Mackenzie' (2001: 342), a view substantiated by David Ellis in his biography of Lawrence (1998: 310). The story revolves around a man who was born on an island but found it to be too populous: 'he wanted an island all of his own: not necessarily to be alone on it, but to make it a world of his own' (Lawrence 2002: 151). In order to accomplish this, the man must find a smaller island: 'It has to be really quite small, before it feels like an island; and this story will show how tiny it has to be, before you can presume to fill it with your own personality' (151). Nicolson, wary of this phenomenon in his own relationship with islands, draws out the inferences: 'The love of islands, the story maintains, is a neurotic condition. They are not so much islands as I-lands, where the inflated self smothers and obliterates all other forms of life' (2001: 344). Nicolson's self-reflexivity is perhaps slightly undermined here by the fact that he, like Mackenzie before him, was the owner of the Shiants. However, in *Sea Room* he articulates an intense interrelationship and reciprocity with the islands, one that also emerges powerfully in the other island writings studied here, in which rather than the human ego filling the island, the island begins to infiltrate the human ego, effecting a sense of the diminishment and dissolution of the self. He writes: 'The place has entered me. It has coloured my life like a stain' (2001: 3).

This blurring of boundaries might seem a potentially unsettling experience, but there is the possibility that 'writing the island' might attract writers of a certain disposition,

who are driven to push at boundaries, to isolate themselves from continental life, and to attempt to construct new ways of being and understanding in the creative context of the island. Gilles Deleuze follows through his distinction between physical island types—the continental and the oceanic—with an analysis of two corresponding types of island 'dreaming':

> Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone—or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. (2004: 10)

Island writers, as well as dreaming of detaching themselves from continents and their histories, perhaps open themselves to the new, and to the corollary possibility of finding fresh 'imagings', to use Buell's term, for human being-in-the-world.

In the delineation of the critical framework and account of the legacy of literary islands a complex picture has emerged. Island as a term is both empirical and contingent, and always infiltrated by the imaginative; island identity is multiple and contested, and although in part defined by the conditions of boundedness and isolation, equally informed by porous edges and by archipelagic and aquapelagic interconnections; and islandness is an emergent property, manifested in the physicality of the island, the psyche of the writer, and in the interplay between the two. As Edmond and Smith conclude: 'Islands are the most graspable and the most slippery of subjects' (2003: 5). In the following section I outline my methodological approaches to this graspable yet slippery subject, and give a brief account of the content of each chapter.

Methodology and overview of chapters

In the sections above I have identified a range of perspectives that I bring to bear on the specific island texts studied in this thesis. As noted, the thematic thrust of the enquiry, as articulated in the research questions, comes from island studies' interest in the particular qualities of islands and corresponding conceptualisations of islandness. The critical tools are drawn from contemporary ecocriticism and its attendant focus on the representation of the relationship between the human and the nonhuman, with Buell's environmental checklist enriched and augmented by the insights of material ecocriticism. The discussion is additionally informed by the theoretical developments surrounding place and place-based writing within the fields of cultural geography and archipelagic writing. In keeping with a desire to keep the islands themselves in view, I begin each chapter, after preliminary

comments, with a description of each respective island or island group, giving a brief overview of its history, before entering into discussion of the texts that relate to it.

My analysis of the literary works is underpinned by the close reading practices of literary studies. The writers studied here have made a decision 'to use written language in ways distinguishable from other forms of communication' (Widdowson 1999: 15). Therefore, as well as focusing on thematic aspects of the text, the research incorporates a process of 'paying attention' (DuBois 2002: 2), at certain points of the argument, to questions of the use of language—to vocabulary, syntax, and semantic content—and to the authors' deployment of literary devices such as metaphor and intertextual allusion. It involves viewing works 'through a lens that heightens attention to their formal properties' (Attridge 2004: 11), and attempting to remain open both to meanings that may be resistant to interpretation (Hopkins 2001) and to expressions of experience that may elude other forms of representation. This is a necessary approach given the thesis' commitment to identifying ways in which literary writing might be of value to island studies.

In an interview conducted for this thesis, Macfarlane elucidates his own decision-making process in this respect, and states that his recent work of place-based writing *The Old Ways*

> is at least activated by a belief in embodied or enacting form, and in pattern-making and narrative as themselves undertaking analysis in ways that can't be translated out into an improved medium of propositional prose. (2015: n.p.)

Through attending to the pattern-making, forms and narrative of the texts studied here, as well as their explicit 'propositional' content, I hope to discover aspects of islandness that might be less accessible to purely empirical, factual discourses. With landscape or place-based writing attracting renewed interest as an 'atlas of relational choreographies' (Iovino 2012: 61), it is perhaps time for a reassessment of the genres and forms with which ecocriticism was first preoccupied. In common with first wave ecocriticism, the thesis focuses on non-fiction prose and poetry, but explores the ways, particularly in the context of the prose works, in which the authors creatively break the traditional frames of landscape writing and create their own hybrid island forms.

It has been my aim to bring critical theory and close reading into a creative conjunction, such that not only do the critical concepts suggest ways in which the writing might be approached and elucidated, thus helping to bring out aspects of islandness, but those aspects and the way in which they are 'imaged' in the writing reciprocally test out the robustness and relevance of the concepts applied to them. I have found that the

literature of the islands studied has suggested to me, through its particular preoccupations and emphases, the themes I should explore in each respective chapter. Some of the issues that have arisen in the course of the research have necessitated the drawing in of new theoretical material that has not yet been incorporated into or fully developed within the disciplines and areas of research detailed above. In these cases a more detailed exposition of the theory is made in the chapters that draw upon it. The research has been augmented, where possible, by interviews with the authors, conducted either in person or via email, and with questions composed in response to the particular themes and issues that have arisen in relation to specific texts. Tim Robinson, Christine Evans, Kathleen Jamie and Robert Macfarlane have all been kind enough to agree to be interviewed, and their replies to my questions are incorporated into my discussion of their work. My commentary on *Tide-race* has been enhanced by research undertaken at the Brenda Chamberlain archive at the University Library of Wales.

Chapter 1 carries out a reading of Tim Robinson's two-volume prose work *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage* and *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. The discussion revolves around the 'good step', a motif Robinson uses throughout the books to explore human being-in-the-world, and a concept to which the island of Árainn is central. I discuss the value of Robinson's evocation of the vast spatiotemporal scales that frame the island for mitigating some of the problems of 'scale' and 'framing' identified in contemporary ecocriticism, and also the innovations of his exploration of dwelling, particularly in terms of his embrace of paradox and contradiction. This leads to a more detailed look at the literary form of the books, involving comparison with place-based writing more usually associated with urban settings, and an investigation of the performative elements of the work. Finally I consider the ways in which Robinson's books might be regarded as a significant contribution to the form and status of the literature of islands.

Chapter 2 takes as its ground the small island of Bardsey (Ynys Enlli), off the Llŷn peninsula in North West Wales, in order to explore another paradigm of being-in-the-world: the 'monism' of matter (Bennett 2010: ix) finding articulation in the emergent strand of material ecocriticism. It centres upon the notion of human immersion in a vibrant and agentic material world, and draws upon both of Iovino and Oppermann's suggested approaches to the cultural investigation of this paradigm. The chapter analyses Brenda Chamberlain's hybrid prose work *Tide-race* and Christine Evans' poetry collection *Island of Dark Horses*, firstly in terms of their evocations of the island's vital materiality, nonhuman agencies and biosemiotic resonances, and secondly, in terms of the meanings

that emerge in the interactions between the writers and their island, particularly those that that arise from their negotiation of Bardsey's powerful cultural associations. The discussion of each author is divided into three sections, with each text investigated firstly in terms of the 'relational choreographies' (Iovino 2012: 61) it reveals, then explored through the way in which these choreographies are inflected by more personal, culturally-inflected 'chorographies', and lastly through analysis of the way in each writer negotiates both the island's association with death and the large number of human bones in its scanty soil.

Chapter 3 focuses on the representation in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* of the almost-island of Orford Ness—the site of an abandoned military weapons testing base. After an initial outline of the Orford Ness episode, the chapter is arranged into three further sections. The first explores the ways in which Sebald negotiates the legacy of earlier forms of landscape writing, focusing in particular on the relationship between Sebald's text and Jean Jacques Rousseau's account of the Île Saint-Pierre in the 'Fifth Walk' of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (2011 [1782]). The second, like Chapter 2, draws upon the insights of material ecocriticism, but focuses upon the second of Iovino and Oppermann's approaches, exploring more fully the way in which matter's 'narrative' power is revealed in the text, through its co-emerging interactions with the narrator-figure. It then considers these interactions in the light of recent developments in Affect Theory. The discussion of affect prepares the ground for the third and final strand of the chapter, which explores the implications for ecocriticism of Sebald's narrator-figure's melancholy resistance, a phenomenon to which the qualities of Orford Ness are integral.

Chapter 4, the final major chapter of the thesis, travels to a collection of 'uninhabited' islands that lie at the edges of the Outer Hebridean archipelago, and draws principally on four 21st century non-fiction works: *Sea Room,* Adam Nicolson's love letter to the Shiants; Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways*, an extended section of which details his experiences in the Scottish Western Isles; and Kathleen Jamie's two prose essay collections, *Findings* and *Sightlines*. There are four main strands to the chapter. In the first I explore continuities between the qualities of these islands and the other islands discussed in the thesis, drawing together some of the themes that have emerged throughout the thesis. In the second I investigate the kinds of reflections these islands foster on the nature of ecological flux. The third strand, following Macfarlane's lead, looks at the potential of these islands for revealing 'signs of strangeness' (Macfarlane 2012a: 11), and the light that they might shed upon the meanings of the early 21st century. The final strand investigates

the perhaps surprising presence in these texts of sophisticated forms of technology. It argues that these islands 'at the edge of the world' might be seen as a stepping off point for the future, and explores the new ways they reveal for thinking about the relationship between the human and the nonhuman and the 'here and now of a posthuman planet' (Braidotti 2013: 197).

Conclusion

In Harrison's *Forests*, as discussed at the beginning of this Introduction, the forest is a place we go to not in order to explore our involvement in the matrix of earth's life but to understand our difference, to reassert our sense of what it means to be human. The forest is civilisation's necessary shadow and when the forest is gone humanity has no material or metaphorical means of understanding itself and its limits. For Harrison, human development is linear and the forest offers a finitude which is relatively stable (at least, while the physical forests remain). We step into it to recognise the wild converse of the civic and in order to 'reaffirm the law of its self-overcoming' (1992: 247), and then we step back. The island, as I hope to demonstrate in this thesis, has a rather different function, providing a more complex paradigm, and offering us a means of understanding both our imbrication and interconnectedness with the more-than-human but also a more generalised sense of dissonance, difference and flux. If the forest is the shadow of civilisation, the island, with the intimacy and identification with the self implied by its boundedness and isolation and the disorientation arising from its permeability and ultimate instability, is the image of human and world in a fluid state of mutual being and becoming. We can only divine our imbrication up to a point, and in the end islandness and the certainities of the human, like the physical margins of the island, dissolve and slide away. However, this instability does not send us running back to the old duality of human/nonhuman, but leaves us at the island's edge creatively exploring those porous margins, where we are both earth, and earth in the process of becoming something else.

Gillis suggests that for the early modern period as much as for the ancient and medieval worlds 'islands were good places to think with' (2003: 25), and they remain so. Rather than dismiss the 'island as metaphor' he believes that we should instead re-orient it towards 'island-earth', and bring it into play in terms of informing and underpinning efforts to alleviate the contemporary environmental crisis. In *Islands of the Mind* he argues:

> Western islomania has not always been a positive force in the world. But because the island remains such a powerful metaphor, it must be reclaimed. Were it to be focused on our precious earth island and not just on particular islands, it could make an enormous difference in the struggle to save the planet. (2004: 168)

This thesis is an attempt, while critiquing the deployment of the metaphors of the island, also to reveal the ways in which those metaphors might be reclaimed. As Wheeler argues: 'frames […] constitute the possibility of organised thinking, but frame-breaking is an important part of human creativity' (2006: 70). The islands studied here, and the interplay between their materiality and their metaphors, have helped the authors who have engaged with them to break frames in a number of ways. I would contend that islands such as these offer a unique *locus* for our twenty-first century imaginations. They are, more than ever, good places to think with; not as small objects of colonial desire, but as offering the grounding for new understandings of our relationship with the nonhuman world and a corresponding reassessment of the human. Schalansky suggests that islands are 'places we project onto' (2012: 8). The chapters that follow attest to the ways in which islands also resist the meanings we impose upon them, and at times project onto us. In resisting and reframing the metaphors we attach to them, islands might be seen as shaping our thoughts. In the light of new understandings of intelligence, consciousness, subjectivity and agency as intercorporeal and immanent throughout the biosphere, islands might even be conceived of as thinking with, and through, *us* even while we are thinking with *them*.

Moreover, the project also offers the opportunity to think further with the 'archipelago', exploring and developing its potential as a new frame for ecocriticism. As already discussed, the term has been adopted within island studies to emphasise the relationships between islands and islands and (as indicated by recent aquapelagic perspectives) islands and their surrounding seas. It has been interpreted by archipelagic thinkers in British and Irish critical and creative writing as a means of revealing, through a focused attentiveness to the local, the kinds of social and political connections that are often occluded by dominant discourses of national identity. For ecocriticism, the archipelagic seems to offer additional possibilities: it represents a profoundly ecological model, which works on both a literal and a metaphorical level and signals a concept with as much, if not more, potential for ecocritical thought than Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's 'rhizome' (2004 [1987]: 3). The rhizome has been identified as a useful metaphor through which the strands of ecocritical thought can be conceptualised (see Oppermann 2010; Zapf 2016), particularly since, as Hubert Zapf argues, 'it indicates both

the diversity of local, regional, and national manifestations, and the transnational and transdisciplinary connectivities of ecological thought' (2016: n.p.). It can be argued that the archipelagic has much in common with these features of the rhizome, the principles of which also include 'connection and heterogeneity' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 7); 'multiplicity' (8); a kind of resilience represented by 'asignifying rupture'(10)[18]; and a rejection of models (such as aborescence) whose metaphors imply hierarchical systems. However, while the rhizome is 'reducible to neither the one nor the multiple' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 23), 'always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*' (27), the archipelagic, in conjunction with various manifestations of islandness, is perhaps able to carry simultaneously a sense of individual distinctiveness and complex interconnectedness. As such it has the potential to speak not only to the discursive formation of ecocriticism but also to posthumanist understandings of both the nature of ecology and the human relationship with the more-than-human.

[18] 'A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 10).

Chapter 1

Performing the 'good step' on Árainn: the advent of psycho-archipelagraphy

> The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell.
> –Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*

> These are mighty abstractions, humanity and the world, and I repent my presumption before them. But here I am, as one always is, faced with the next step.
> –Tim Robinson, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*

> Then it's one foot then the other as you step out on the road, step out on the road.
> How much weight? How much weight?
> –Jane Siberry, 'Calling All Angels'

Introduction: Árainn

The *Stones of Aran* diptych represents an attempt on the part of its author, the artist, mathematician, cartographer and writer Tim Robinson, to give a fully comprehensive account of Árainn, the largest of the Irish Aran islands. Indeed, according to the cultural geographer John Wylie, the work reflects 'Robinson's own freely-admitted ambition: the total description of landscape' (2012: 366). Robinson left London in 1972 and settled on Árainn, living there until 1984, when he moved to Roundstone, Connemara, also in the far west of Ireland, and where he is still resident. During the twelve years he spent on the island, he devoted himself to exploring and mapping the place, accruing as much information as possible, and recording his observations in notebooks and diaries. He then set about condensing and ordering these notes, publishing in 1985 the first of his two non-fiction volumes about the island: *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, followed in 1995 by *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*. The first charts Robinson's tracing on foot of the entire coastline of Árainn, while the second sees him delving into the inland areas of the island. Both books record in layers of painstakingly accumulated detail the complex interweavings of the island's human and nonhuman histories.

The landscapes of the Aran islands are undoubtedly rich in such histories. Lying around 10km off the coast of County Clare, they were formed between three hundred and twenty-five and three hundred and fifty million years ago (Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) 2003: 21), though their distinctive limestone karst, which is soluble in water, continues to be carved by the Atlantic waves and rainwater (Macfarlane 2009: ix). Their

human history is also marked in stone: there are wedge tombs on the islands dating back to around 2300BC, along with several Late Bronze Age hill forts, including Dún Aonghasa, which is situated on the north western coast of Árainn (Jones 2004: 169). The Early Medieval period saw an influx to the islands of Celtic Christian *peregrini*, and the establishment by St Enda of the first monastery on Árainn in the early sixth century AD (Jones 2004: 190). Enda, so the story goes, arrived in a stone boat (CDU 2003: 46). This is not the only myth associated with the islands. Under certain meteorological conditions the mirage of a mountainous island appears to the west of Árainn. Legend has it that this island, known in local tradition as Árainn Bheag (Little Aran), becomes visible once every seven years (Freitag 2013: 208), and between about 993 and 1873 it was marked as an actual island on maritime charts, under the name Hy Brazil[1] (Berry 2009: 5).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Aran islands were seen as important repositories of Gaelic language and culture, and as touchstones for Celtic identity. W. B. Yeats famously instructed John Millington Synge to go to the islands and record the life there (Robinson 1992: xxi), which Synge did, publishing in 1907 what Robinson calls his 'peerless report' (2008 [1985]: 15)*, The Aran Islands.* During the 1930s the islands drew the attention of the American film director Robert Flaherty, and his British-produced *Man of Aran* (1934), is set on Árainn. Harvey O'Brien argues that the film portrays a 'Rousseauian' (2004: 48) vision of primitive island life, in which central sequences such as a basking shark hunt 'were reconstructed from practices which had long ceased; shark hunting had not taken place on the islands in over one hundred years' (47). The modern-day Aran islands are a significant site for insects, birds, marine life and rare flora, all of which now fall under the protection of European wildlife legislation (CDU 2003: 92-3), and the current human population of Árainn stands at between eight and nine hundred (Central Statistics Office website).

Despite the enduring cultural fascination with these islands, Robinson's *Stones of Aran* books were relatively slow to attract attention after publication, and were largely out of circulation during the early 2000s (Wylie 2012). However, in more recent years the two volumes have been reissued (in 2008 and 2009 respectively) and have garnered increasing critical acclaim, hailed by Robert Macfarlane as 'one of the most sustained, intensive and imaginative studies of a landscape that has ever been carried out' (2005: n.p.), and by Wylie as 'one of the stand-out achievements in the Western tradition of writing about

[1] Variants of this name include O'Brasil and Hy Breasail (Robinson 2009 [1995]: 603).

culture, nature and landscape' (2011: n.p.). In addition to this approbation, the works have also been seen as ground-breaking in terms of their form and reach, which, for Wylie, 'position them […] as active contributions to contemporary geographical thinking, practice and theorization' (2012: 366). However, despite the agreement that the books represent a major achievement, there is a lack of consensus about the exact nature of that achievement. While Macfarlane and Wylie both praise the works for their exploration of the relationship between humanity and landscape, their conclusions are markedly at odds. Macfarlane's summation of the work is as follows:

> For years, Robinson walked, and as he did so the sentences began to come—beautiful, dense, paced. The result, finished in 1995, was the 830-page *Stones of Aran* diptych, *Pilgrimage* and *Labyrinth*: an exceptional investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling, and of the deep entanglement of the human and the mineral. (2005: n.p.)

Wylie, by contrast, states that

> The paradox haunting Robinson's writing is that the more he says, the more the words accumulate, thousands of pages of them, the more Aran and Connemara [the subject of Robinson's later books] withdraw from view. […] A clearer disavowal of dwelling, of a correspondence of land and life, is hard to imagine. (2012: 379)

In this chapter I explore the motif of the 'good step'—a term Robinson uses throughout the books to explore the nature of human being-in-the-world—and address the question of why the Aran diptych has attracted such apparently contradictory readings. In part the chapter forms a dialogue with Wylie's 2012 essay 'Dwelling and displacement: Tim Robinson and the questions of landscape', both because this is, as yet, one of the few critical works to deal at any length with the Aran diptych, and because his views, which stand out against both Macfarlane's evaluation of the work and the more widespread embrace of Robinson as an archipelagic writer *par excellence*, offer a productive tension and focus for the argument. Throughout the chapter I explore the role of Árainn in fostering Robinson's innovatory perspectives, arguing that his evocation of dwelling, the spatiotemporal frames in which he situates this dwelling, and the form of the books themselves, are all profoundly influenced by his contact with the island. Robinson responds throughout the work to its 'natureculture': to the complicated interweavings of its biologies, geologies, and human histories and myths. Thus, in the pages of the Aran diptych, the limestone karst, the human inhabitants, the myriad nonhuman life forms, Enda's stone boat, and the mythical island of Hy Brazil, all play a role, along with Robinson's sporadic explorations of the landscape's impact upon his own psyche. The

primary material studied in the chapter is augmented with excerpts from an interview carried out with Robinson himself as part of the research for the thesis.

The good step

Robinson's concept of the good step—the guiding motif of the diptych—is inspired by an experience he has while walking along a beach early in his stay on Árainn. He becomes aware of a wave 'with a denser identity and more purposeful momentum than the rest' (2008: 19), which gradually resolves itself into the shapes of two or three dolphins. This prompts him to reflect on their profound at-oneness with their environment. For Robinson they are 'wave made flesh, with minds solely to ensure the moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world' (19), and he wistfully identifies this as an example of 'wholeness beyond happiness' (19), a unity of body and world that is largely denied to the human. 'A dolphin may be its own poem', he writes, 'but we have to find our rhymes elsewhere, between words in literature, between things in science, and our way back to the world involves us in an endless proliferation of detours' (19). This finding 'our way back to the world' becomes the focus of the work, formulated as the good step: 'Let the problem be symbolized by that of taking a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave. Is it possible to think towards a *human* conception of this 'good step'?' (20).

Unfortunately, the difficulties involved in moving towards such a step are manifold: 'But our world is nurtured in such a multiplicity of modes of awareness that it must be impossible to bring them to a common focus even for the notional duration of a step' (2008: 20). In Robinson's view, the dolphin inhabits a world that is 'more continuous and therefore more productive of unity' (20) than ours —

> our craggy, boggy, overgrown and overbuilt terrain, on which every step carries us across geologies, biologies, myths, histories, politics, etcetera, and trips us with the trailing *Rosa spinosissima* of personal associations. (20)

But the solution is not simply to attempt to omit or simplify any of these aspects of experience—for Robinson this would be 'to forgo our honour as human beings' (20)—even though, as he argues, the task of taking them all into account 'would be a crushing backload to have to carry' (20). He concludes with a question that haunts the two volumes of the diptych: 'Can such contradictions be forged into a state of consciousness even fleetingly worthy of its ground?' (20). Given the obstacles that Robinson has already described, one might assume from the start that the answer is likely to be 'no'. Nevertheless, no sooner has Robinson set himself the 'problem', than he shoulders his

crushing backload and sets off, first walking the entire coastline of the island and then progressing into the 'labyrinth' of the island's interior.

From the beginning, the island of Árainn is central to Robinson's quest. Early in *Pilgrimage* he accounts for his choice of the Aran Islands, writing:

> However, it will already be clear that Aran, of the world's countless facets one of the most finely carved by nature, closely structured by labour and minutely commented by tradition, is *the* exemplary terrain upon which to dream of that work, the guidebook to the adequate step. (2008: 20)

As we saw in the Introduction to the thesis, Pete Hay believes that islands are 'special places, paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled' (2006: 31). For Robinson, Árainn seems to be paradigmatic in just this way; it is *the* place to consider the possibility of the adequate step. Explaining his choice of the island further in his essay collection *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*, Robinson describes in more detail the ways in which the qualities of place are 'distilled' and intensified on the island:

> Aran is extraordinary in so many ways—its limestone polished by glaciation into a mirror of geological theory, its floral rarities flourishing the characteristics by which they might be looked up in Floras of the Aran Islands, its rambling ramifying paths like invitations to explore, the Irish language teasing with inimitable sounds, and cryptic Celtic allusions. (2007: 212)

Moreover, the island seems to have played an active role in Robinson's choice; there is a sense in which it has chosen *him* (a perception echoed by other writers studied in this thesis in relation to their own respective islands). In the interview Robinson explains: 'We took off to Aran, thinking to stay for a month or two while we reinvented our future; but then the islands hijacked me, and I spent most of the next twelve years there' (2014: n.p.). Hay also suggests that the qualities of islandness 'attract affection, loyalty, identification' (2006: 31), and, again, Robinson's dogged commitment to the island and to his project are evident throughout the two Aran books.

Dreams of total knowledge

But why does Árainn's combination of nature, labour and tradition render it so compelling to the author? For a start the island seems to foster certain forms of authorial ambition and attention. For example, through its topography, Árainn appears to offer the possibility that it might be known and represented in its entirety. This is an ambition fostered, perhaps, by the way in which small islands inspire 'dreams of total knowledge in those who love them' (Macfarlane 2012a: 111). Macfarlane lists the work of several authors, including Robinson and Adam Nicolson, who

> had been animated at first by the delusion of a comprehensive totality, the belief that they might come to know their chosen place utterly because of its boundedness. And all had, after long acquaintance, at last understood that familiarity with a place will lead not to absolute knowledge but only ever to further enquiry. (111)

This is a perception that Robinson fully corroborates in his own account of his experience of Árainn. In his essay 'Islands and Images' he describes the occasion of his first visit to the island and his meeting with an islander who explained, in mischievously dead-pan fashion, the geography of the place: '"The ocean", he said, "goes all around the island"' (2007:1). Robinson's own explorations establish not only the veracity of the statement but also its implications: 'A few days' rambles confirmed that fact, and revealed another: that to explore an island is to court obsession' (1). He goes on:

> There is something compulsive in one's relationship to an island. A mainland area with its ambiguous or arbitrary boundaries doesn't constrain the attention in the same way. With an island, it is as if the surrounding ocean like a magnifying glass directs an intensified vision onto the narrow field of view. A little piece is cut out of the world, marked off in fact by its richness in significances. So an island appears to be mappable. Already a little abstracted from reality, already half-concept, it holds out the delusion of a comprehensible totality. (2007: 1)

Robinson's observations here resonate with elements of islandness discussed in the Introduction to the thesis. We see the notion of island boundedness coming into play, with Robinson contrasting the idea of the mainland's ambiguous or arbitrary boundaries with, he implies, the island's clear boundaries. There is also a sense of Hay's 'psychologies of island experience' (2013: 209)—distinctive subjectivities that emerge in response to the physical qualities of islands and their surrounding seas—in Robinson's perception of the way in which the sea magnifies attention, even 'to the point of obsession' (2008: 16), as he notes in *Pilgrimage.* Robinson's assertion that islands are particularly rich in 'significances' and that they intensify one's attention *to* those significances highlights their potential value as both *loci* and *foci* of study, a move that perhaps resolves to some degree the issue Owe Ronström identifies when he asks, 'When representations of islands are the focus of study, what about island as locus?' (2013: 153). Robinson also demonstrates his understanding that an island is always-already 'half-concept': a complex interweaving of reality and construct. Robinson's consciousness of this pre-troping means that he is aware, from the beginning, not only of the delusory quality of dreams of total knowledge, but also of the notion of island boundedness. He argues:

> The island is held by the ocean as a well-formed concept is grasped by the mind. But the analogy breaks down, or is diversified; the ocean has broken down Aran into three islands, each in its own relation to each other, to the mainland and to the ocean itself' (2007: 1)

This perception establishes Robinson's vision as a form of archipelagraphy *avant la lettre*, fulfilling Elizabeth DeLoughrey's call for 'a historiography that considers chains of islands in fluctuating relationship to their surrounding seas, islands and continents' (2001: 23).

Interestingly, though, and despite the clear correspondences between their accounts of the attraction of islands, Macfarlane and Robinson's respective formulation of the dream of 'totality' that arises from the qualities of islandness is slightly different. Macfarlane, while apparently echoing Robinson's observations, writes of a '*comprehensive* totality' (2012a: 111, emphasis mine), Robinson of a '*comprehensible* totality' (2007: 1, emphasis mine). This discrepancy perhaps begins to account for some of the complexity of the good step—and by association, for the conflicting views in critical assessments of the nature and success of that step. It seems that it is not enough for Robinson merely to walk the land and record *comprehensively* its every detail (as if this were not challenging enough), but that the good step also requires that he should seek to *comprehend* the totality of the place, a feature to which I return later in this chapter.

Of course, as Robinson readily acknowledges, the notion of a comprehensible totality is a delusion, but he follows his obsession nonetheless. In my interview with him, Robinson explained the intensity of his focus as well as his sense of the ultimate impossibility of his quest:

> I wore the network of tender little fields and bleak rocky shores of Aran into my skin until I could have printed off a map of them by rolling on a sheet of paper, but I was always aware of the infinity of ways in which the place exceeded my knowledge of it. (2014: n.p.)

For John Elder, Robinson's attention to detail is evidence of his commitment to the island itself: 'facts are not subordinated to a larger plot or used to reinforce an argument. Their accumulation is itself the central project: a determination to hear what this stony island-world has to say for itself' (2009: x). In a move that reflects the powerful connection between writer and landscape evidenced in the books, Elder compares Robinson's deep kinetic and historical knowledge of the island to the 'songlines' 'by which Australia's aboriginal people guide their own pilgrimages' (2009: xi), and the ecocritic Eamonn Wall hails the diptych as 'a series of Aran songlines' (2011: 43-44).

The degree and complexity of the attention Robinson brings to the island has also been noted by cultural geographers. Catherine Nash, for example, encapsulates Robinson's method when she describes him 'tracing the intersection of bodily experience, botany, geology, mythology, history and folklore, in his attempts to evoke the deep resonances and multiple dimensions of a place' (Nash, cited in Wylie 2012: 367-8). It is an approach that

resonates powerfully with the kind of multi-layered attention to place Doreen Massey (1994) recognises in an earlier island text, Dorothy Carrington's *Granite Island,* and one that seems to correspond very directly with Hay's call for an island phenomenology that 'lays stress upon vernacular constructions of meaning and their attendant technologies, beliefs, value codes and myth structures via a process of multi-sensorial receptivity to that-which-would-be-known' (2006: 33). The attempt to engage so profoundly with a particular locale, especially in the devoted attention it brings to an 'outlier' of the British and Irish archipelago, rather than one of its metropolitan 'centres', has likewise established Robinson as an archipelagic writer *par excellence*. The Atlantic Archipelagos Research Project (AARP), a group, as stated on their website, involved in 'reconceiving, refiguring, indeed re-mapping attitudes towards the British Isles, the islands, the north-east Atlantic archipelago', aims in particular to 'develop research interests in and around the work of cartographer and author Tim Robinson', in recognition of the attention he pays to littoral spaces.

While Robinson can be seen to be singing the features of Árainn into continued existence, his medium is not musical. Neither is it cartographic, despite his undoubted skills in this area. In fact, his early research on Árainn *was* prompted by his attempt to generate an income for himself by making a map of the island to sell to tourists, an idea suggested to him by the local postmistress. For this project he consulted visiting experts as well as seeking out in every village 'the custodians of local lore' (2008: 18), determined to see Aran through 'variously informed eyes' (18). However, the limitations of cartography soon became apparent to him—its inability, perhaps, to reflect such a multiplicity of perspectives or, as Robinson himself argues, to record the experience of more personal intensities of self-place interaction: 'those rare places and times, the nodes at which the layers of experience touch and may be fused together' (2008: 18). For this he needed to move into another medium. He states: 'I now regard the Aran maps as preliminary sortings of material for another art, the world-hungry art of words' (19).

Robinson is also aware of the potential distortions maps may enshrine. An aspect of his work that resonates particularly powerfully with both island studies and British and Irish archipelagic perspectives, in their shared resistance to colonial/continental impositions, is his critical approach to the official recording of place names. Robinson is always alert to the political histories implicit in naming, as well as to the social and ecological stories that official records can obscure. This is clear from the beginning of the diptych, where Robinson states his insistence on using the islands' 'correct names, Inis

Oírr, Inis Meáin and Árainn, rather than the anglicisms Inisheer, Inishmaan and Inishmore' (2008: 8), explaining parenthetically that

> (This last was apparently concocted by the Ordnance Survey for its map of 1839,[2] as a rendering in English phonetic values of the Irish 'Inis Mór,' big island, a name which did not exist previously but is now replacing Árainn even in the island's own speech). (8)

This discussion demonstrates the subtle way in which colonial impositions can act to dull the specificity of colonised places. The word Árainn, Robinson explains,

> derives from the word *ára,* a kidney, the sense of which has spread to include the loins and the back in general, and so come to be applied to the back of a rise of land. […] And in fact the three Aran Islands are fragments of a single long, low escarpment, a broken arm of the limestone uplands known as the Burren on the mainland to the east. (2008: 8)

Thus the replacement of the original name with the more generic 'big island' has entailed the loss of the rich information the old name encapsulated relating to the actual shape of the islands and their geological, archipelagic relationship with the mainland.

Both Robinson's devotion to individual places and his all-inclusive aspirations are enacted in the astonishing density of observation and detail in the diptych as he deploys the 'world-hungry art of words'. His method is consistent throughout. At each new 'station' of his pilgrimage he attempts to excavate its natural and human histories, a process that results in page upon page of writing that bears patient witness to every aspect of the island. It is difficult to single out any one episode in particular, but as a brief example I will trace the trajectory of a section of *Pilgrimage* entitled 'Leviathan' (2008: 162-166). This passage finds Robinson covering a single mile of coastline. He begins by analysing the rocks, both individually (in the case of a single forty foot long block on the shoreline) and collectively (in their arrangement in the cliff-face). He then recounts an occasion on which he witnessed, from this cliff, a basking shark 'rolling lazily in the sun-filled water' (2008: 163), an anecdote that leads him into a discussion of the rendition of the names of the basking shark in Irish and English and their possible semantic roots.

He then turns his attention to the history of shark fishing on the islands, and to its methods, referencing, as he goes, Tom O'Flaherty's account of a shark hunt in *Aranmen All,* and digressing to explain how oil harvested from the sharks' livers was used in Aran as fuel for little lights or '*muiríní*' (2008: 164). At this point Robinson moves on to discussion of Robert Flaherty's film *Man of Aran* and its iconic (but anachronistic) shark hunt sequence, noting Flaherty's own interest in the possibility of reanimating the shark

[2] Brian Friel deals with the same issue of the clumsy transliterations and anglicisations of Irish place names that occurred in the course of the Ordnance Survey's mapping projects of the 1830s in his play *Translations* (1980).

fishing industry on the islands in the 1930s. This idea is one, Robinson tells us, that also occurred to a modern-day islander he met on the clifftop on the same day as he sighted the shark. Together they witnessed a Norwegian trawler in the North Sound of the island harvesting a shoal of sharks, and casting the carcasses back into the sea after they had removed the livers. This islander then attempted to go into the shark hunting business himself, supplying a small company on Achill Island, who marketed the liver oil and the fins—the oil as an engineering lubricant (of the kind used, Robinson notes, on the Apollo space missions) and the fins as an ingredient for Chinese shark's fin soup.

'The immensities in which this little place is wrapped'

The passage described above has a spatial trajectory that sees Robinson's attention move from a single rock on the Árainn shoreline to the history of space exploration. Furthermore, in its mention of Norwegian trawlers and shark's fin soup, his account hints at the island's implication in a global economic system. As these elements might suggest, Robinson's devotion to recording the features of the island applies not only to that-which-would-be-known in his immediate environment, but moves far beyond this, and, indeed, he proposes a vast spatiotemporal context for the books. He begins the first volume of the Aran diptych as follows: 'Cosmologists now say that Time began ten or fifteen thousand million years ago, and that the horizon of the visible universe is therefore the same number of light-years from us' (2008: 5). While he immediately acknowledges that these figures are based on our current understanding of the history of the cosmos, and will in all likelihood be superseded at some point by another perhaps equally speculative set of figures, he proposes that this immense span of space-time should provide us with the frame for our reading of the text. He writes,

> But for the moment let it stand as the context, the ultimate context, of other spans of time and space mentioned throughout this book (320 million years, a century, a quarter of a mile, a couple of paces, are measures that recur, I note, on thumbing through my manuscript). (2008: 5)

This expansive contextualisation is one that requires quite a feat of imaginative orientation—moving as it does from the beginning of time and the furthest extent of the physical universe down to a couple of human footsteps—but it is a perspective once again made possible in a variety of ways by the island and its surrounding waters. Describing his immediate attraction to Árainn, Robinson explains that what captivated him first were 'the immensities in which this little place is wrapped' (2008: 17): the elemental forces of the weather and the Atlantic breakers and the 'wildly starry' (17) nights. The perception of

island ‘immensities’ is a phenomenon that Derek Walcott has also identified in terms of Carribbean island writing. Speaking in an interview, Walcott says:

> I think the island experience of writers in some way contributes to a larger sense of space, and of time, and even of history in the Caribbean. […] If you live on a rock in Barbuda you are really in an immense ocean … and in an immense sky, and that vertical figure of the individual person is within large elements of physical feeling. (cited in Burnett 2000: 39)

Walcott’s description of Barbuda resonates with Robinson’s account of the Aran Islands and suggests a sense of islandness—and of the experience of an individual person standing on those islands—that might be generalisable, or at least shared in certain island locations in different parts of the globe. Looking westward across the Atlantic from Árainn the next landfall is the eastern seaboard of North America, almost three thousand miles away: like Barbuda, the island is set in an immense ocean and an immense sky.

However, it is not only the breakers and the stars that connect Robinson with a larger sense of space, time and history. A significant contribution to both the vast temporal framework of the diptych and the form of the writing itself comes from the island’s rock—the ‘stones of Aran’ that give the work its title, and lead to Macfarlane’s assessment of the works as a document of the ‘deep entanglement of the human and the mineral’ (2005: n.p.). The span of three hundred and twenty million years that features in Robinson’s contextualisation of his Aran writings is the time, according to Robinson, that has elapsed ‘since the limestone of which Aran is formed was being laid down as layer upon layer of sediment in a tropical sea’ (2008: 5). Even then, this does not represent the ‘beginning’ of the islands, since ‘that sea was already ancient and full of intricate lives, the heirs of a previous three thousand million years of evolution’ (6). The scientific and the artistic interweave here: Robinson’s approach reflects a scientifically-informed knowledge of evolution, but draws out a range of inferences and meanings. One meaning that emerges strongly from the geological detail of the description is a sense of the island’s interconnection with other land masses, and in this it is a profoundly—and materially—archipelagic perspective. Robinson argues that:

> This genesis of Aran is not to be distinguished from that of the whole limestone area of central Ireland, or indeed from that of other limestones farther afield in Europe and America that date from the same Carboniferous period. (2008: 6)

It is an approach that fulfils, at least from a geological perspective, Doreen Massey’s call for ‘a sense of place, an understanding of its ‘character’, which can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond’ (1994: 156).

In his commitment to mapping these geological connections, Robinson enters into a discussion of the science of 'plate tectonics', and the ways in which the fractional movements in the plates that form the earth's crust have resulted in the formation of the continents and their mountain chains. He gradually works his way back to a point in history at which the earth consisted simply of one land mass and one sea:

> Two hundred million years ago the Atlantic did not exist and all the land-masses of today were clasped together in one continuity, in pre-Adamite innocence of the fact that one day scientists inhabiting its scattered fragments would give it the lovely name of Pangaea, all-earth, and that its unbounded encircling ocean was Panthalassa, all-sea. (2008: 7)

Robinson has provided us here with a vision of 'island-earth' not as metonym but as ancient material reality. But even having reached such a moment of planetary unity, he pushes still further back in time:

> But even great Pangaea is not the beginning; it is no more than a half-way house, inadequate but indispensable, for the mind travelling back in search of Eden. The rocks of Aran, for instance, pre-date it, as do many others. (2008: 7)

Robinson's mention of going further back in search of Eden is an apparent contradiction of his previous assertion that Pangaea was 'pre-Adamite'. It implies that Eden represents for him something other than the biblical garden-home of Adam and Eve, perhaps symbolising, in a subtle deployment of the island/Eden trope (see Grove 1995), the beginning of Árainn itself—a point that vastly pre-dates the arrival of the human. Macfarlane describes the opening chapter of *Pilgrimage* as a 'creation myth' (2009: xi). Unlike other creation myths, however, Robinson's contains no absolute statement of origin; though he takes us back to the beginning of time, roughly ten or fifteen thousand million years ago, he immediately qualifies this information by suggesting that this figure will almost certainly be recalibrated as scientific knowledge develops, and he does not hazard an explanation of how time itself began. In other words, his account of 'creation' is characterised by uncertainty and contradiction, lacking, as it does, a clear beginning, and disrupting and reworking existing myths. This embrace of uncertainty is a feature of Robinson's writing that becomes increasingly relevant to my argument as the chapter goes on.

It is not until Robinson has established his expansive spatiotemporal framework that he allows himself to scale down in order to situate Árainn in the context of the north-western corner of County Clare—an area to which it (and its sister islands) was once attached—all the while stressing the importance of this contextualisation in guiding the

observer's engagement with the island. It represents a means, perhaps, of rendering the comprehensive more comprehensible:

> the land forms visible out there, a little abstracted as they are by distance, can be seen as images of Árainn itself in the context of its geological past, and it is valuable to read them thus before going on to clamber among the details and complexities of the way ahead, so that an inchoate mass of impressions may find an ordering and a clarification. (Robinson, 2008: 26)

It is the island and the rocks themselves that seem to suggest a way in which the 'ordering and clarification' might be translated into the art of words. The structure of the text, as Robinson states, 'explores and takes its form from a single island, Árainn itself' (21), but the interweaving of island and textual form goes further than this. Robinson writes that 'This bare, soluble limestone is a uniquely tender and memorious ground' (2008: 9), and argues that the island is a 'land of total recall' (9) matched by 'a folk-mind of matching tenacity, focused by the limitations of island life and with the powers of memory of an ancient oral culture' (9). These are qualities that, from the start, seem to influence Robinson's method. His writing is certainly extraordinarily memorious in its mass of detail, and it does indeed aspire to be a work of total recall.

Macfarlane draws attention to an even more intricate matching of text and ground. In his Introduction to *Pilgrimage* he writes:

> The erosive habits of limestone mean that it is rich with clandestine places: runnels, crevasses, hollows, and gulleys. So, too, is Robinson's style, the polished surfaces of which contain an enormous complexity of thought. (2009: xii)

The sense of the relationship between the text and the landscape that Macfarlane comments upon here is heightened by Robinson's own frequent metatextual observations, which further tangle the two. It is a phenomenon that resonates with recent developments in material ecocriticism that conceptualise nature and culture as densely intertwined. Stacy Alaimo, for example, stresses the importance of trying to 'reveal the environmental traces within all texts' (2010: 8), and Serenella Iovino suggests that landscape itself is 'storied' (2012: 58) and is a 'site of narrativity' (57). In the light of these observations, sentences from the Aran diptych such as, 'Headlands appear one beyond another, chapters still to be read of an unfolding tale' (2008: 39), 'The fox's hole no longer exists, and a page has been torn out of my book' (2009: 130), and 'I used to browse from field to field here as if leafing through a well-loved anthology' (2009: 320), have less the aspect of metaphor and more the feel of a profound sense in which the text is infused with traces of the landscape and the landscape is itself textual. This is an impression which applies equally to the relationship between Robinson himself and the text and the island. In the film, *Tim*

Robinson: Connemara, Robinson speaks of a mantra he devises to guide his work: "While walking this land I am the pen on the paper, while drawing this map my pen is myself walking the land", suggesting that his body is the instrument of translation for the text the landscape reveals, and at the same time that the pen is somehow transcribing the writer onto the landscape in a kind of intertextuality.

Ecological framings: place, planet, cosmos

As these correspondences begin to suggest, the ways in which Robinson responds to the island resonate with aspects of contemporary ecocriticism, and with 'green' perspectives more generally. John Brannigan associates Robinson's work directly with 'an ecological imagination of localities and environments' (2014: 232). However, Robinson does not identify himself as an environmentalist *per se*. In fact he actively discourages the application of this label to himself (2009: 8), and writes with apparent reservation about the 'secular eschatologies' (1992: xxxix) of our age, presumably referring to the apocalyptic discourses associated with contemporary environmental issues. The good step is not, for him, predominantly concerned with fostering ecological sensibility. Resisting narratives of a lost human connection with the earth, and of religious interpretations of such a pre-Fall state of grace, he declares:

> For the dolphin's ravenous cybernetics and lean hydrodynamics induce in me no nostalgia for imaginary states of past instinctive or future theological grace. Nor is the ecological imperative, that we learn to tread more lightly on the earth, what I have in mind – though that commandment […] might indeed acquire some authority from the attitude to the earth I would like to hint at with my step. (2008: 19-20)

However, through his geological contextualisation of the island and through the links he makes between the minutiae of the island and elemental global immensities, Robinson seems to be approaching forms of thinking that might be seen as ecological in the broadest sense, such that the notion of the good step might indeed foster forms of treading more lightly on the earth.

Robinson certainly presents his account of the island in what might be seen, from an environmental perspective, as a valuably global context. It is this kind of breadth of imaginative scope that Ursula Heise (2008) seeks in her concept of 'eco-cosmopolitanism'. As we saw in the Introduction, this is an approach that enables us to consider environmental and socioenvironmental issues not from a localist perspective, but on a

planetary scale. Robinson does not concern himself explicitly with matters of ecological advocacy or socioenvironmental justice, though these *are* implicit in the narrative, albeit with a localised focus,[3] and at the same time he evinces a passionate attentiveness to the local in a manner that may seem to conflict with Heise's rejection of ties to local places. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to overstate the implications of his apparent 'localism', and its relationship with nation-based understandings of place. Jos Smith describes the contextualisation of Árainn in terms of its geological history as offering a 'pre-national understanding of the archipelagic space' (2013: 11), and Robinson himself is certainly not interested in nationalistic claims on place. Discussing his geological contextualisation of the island, he writes, 'So the geographies over which we are so suicidally passionate are, on this scale of events, fleeting expressions of the earth's face' (2008: 7). It is a perspective that functions, effectively, to de-territorialise the island, to unhinge it from limiting ties to nationhood, and instead places it in a more far-reaching planetary context.

Moreover, for Robinson, and notwithstanding his commitment to recording local detail and his attempt to know a place profoundly, rootedness is emphatically *not* a component of the good step. He firmly states:

> In all this the step is to be distinguished, maximally, from those metaphorical appendages of humanity […]: roots – a concept which, though obviously deep, is to me unacceptably vegetable. (2008: 364)

When I asked Robinson to expand on this assertion, he explained:

> Roots spread out from a centre they themselves fix in place, lay claim to a territory, suck up historical and political poisons, limit the access of nomads, passers-by and explorers. I exaggerate, of course, and there is much to be said for settled communities in their familiar old places, but as a human being I claim the freedom of the globe's surface and accept responsibility for it. (2014: n.p.)

These clarifications of his position align Robinson more firmly with Heise's 'eco-cosmopolitanism', since she herself identifies scepticism 'vis-à-vis local rootedness' (2008: 5) as a vital element in the search for the counter-models to the kind of nation-based concepts of identity that, in her view, impede the development of eco-cosmopolitanism. She sees this scepticism as instrumental in fostering new conceptualisations that validate 'individual and collective forms of identity that define themselves in relation to a multiplicity of places and place experiences' (5). Robinson, as

[3] For example, Robinson discusses the British Government's scheme, in the famine years of the nineteenth century, whereby starving and displaced Irish peasants were employed to carry out hard labour in return for oatmeal, a project that resulted in the building of new piers on the island (2009: 101), and he documents the driving out of Árainn's tenant farmers by the extortionate rents imposed by absentee landlords in the years that followed the Great Hunger, a development that resulted in large tracts of land coming under the lease of single landholders (2008: 122-123).

we have seen, while intensely devoted to his island home, defends his cosmopolitan right to define himself in relation to the entire surface of the globe.

Robinson's freedom, however, does not end at the limits of the globe's surface. In the Preface to *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara* he states: ''Landscape' has during the past decade become a key term in several disciplines; but I would prefer this body of work to be read in the light of 'Space'' (2007: vi). He expresses a fascination with 'the amplitude of actual Space, in which one can without contradiction build deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings' (vi), and argues that

> ultimately there is no space but Space, 'nor am I out of it'[…], for it is, among everything else, the interlocking of all our mental and physical trajectories, good or ill, through all the subspaces of experience up to the cosmic. (vi)

While this statement might be viewed as ultimately eliding the kinds of pressing socio-environmental issues with which Heise calls us to engage, in terms of broader ecological perspectives it could also be seen as establishing a conceptual framework that might benefit our thinking. For Robinson, it appears, only such a cosmic vision could allow one to build without contradiction those 'deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings' he evokes. The suggestion here is that the concept of 'dwelling', at least as it has been understood in a Heideggerian sense, can only become plausible and meaningful when the human is placed in such an immense frame. The good step, then, implies taking into consideration, to the best of our human perceptive capacity (augmented at any given moment by 'the latest scientific speculations'), all of the aspects of our experience, from the touch of our feet on the ground to our apprehension of the universe that surrounds us—a trajectory that the qualities of the island, from its minutiae to its immensities, themselves facilitate.

It is a perspective that may help to mitigate the 'derangements of scale' Timothy Clark identifies (2012: 148) in cultural responses to environmental issues. Clark argues that cartography as a medium of representation is unable to encompass the spatial and temporal dimensions implied by phenomena such as climate change. He takes as his epigraph for his discussion of scale a quotation from Simon A. Levin's 1989 lecture 'The Problem of Pattern and Scale in Ecology', in which Levin argued: 'When we observe the environment, we necessarily do so on only a limited range of scales; therefore, our perception of events provides us with only a low-dimensional slice of a high-dimensional cake' (1992: 1945). Robinson's view of landscape, presented via the medium of the world-hungry art of words, seems to present a 'slice' that incorporates both the low-dimensional and the high-dimensional. It is a perspective that ultimately enables him to see Árainn as

what he calls ‘a segment of my home-planet’ (2009: 608), a formulation that perhaps dispels, in a single phrase, some of the tension between ‘place’ and ‘planet’ identified by Heise, providing a means by which we might move conceptually between the local and the global. One of the advantages of his approach is the flexibility it seems to offer for moving between his objects of attention. Heise suggests that Google Earth—the satellite view with ‘infinite zooming tools’ (2008: 21)—offers an aesthetic model ‘for considering ecological crisis and environmental as well as cultural connectedness across different spatial scales’ (209). In its elasticity, and well before the advent of Google Earth, Robinson’s literary exploration of the islanded good step similarly allows us to zoom in and out, at any point able to move quickly from minutiae to global forms, ‘through all the subspaces of experiences up to the cosmic’ (Robinson 1996: vi). Macfarlane argues, quite rightly, that this ‘continual vibration between the particular and the universal’ (2009: xi) is one of the work’s most distinctive elements.

However, as I have already suggested, the scales with which Árainn puts Robinson in touch move beyond even the discourses of contemporary environmental crisis. Through his exploration of the island’s ‘immensities’, Robinson presents us with the two-way vista of a pre- and potentially post- human world involved in endless processes of change: a time scale so vast that it dwarfs human concerns and renders them, in the greater scheme of things, irrelevant. Thus, pondering the gradual erosion of the island’s limestone, Robinson comments that

> Unless vaster earth-processes intervene Aran will ultimately dwindle to a little reef and disappear. It seems unlikely that any creatures we would recognize as our descendants will be here to chart that rock in whatever shape of sea succeeds to Galway Bay. (2008: 28)

Indeed, he moves beyond a merely *planetary* framework to one that, as we have already seen, appears to encompass the whole of the known universe. In this respect there are resonances with Timothy Morton’s *The Ecological Thought.* Greg Garrard argues that Morton’s book is one that ‘admits the notion of urgent environmental crisis—haunted as it always is by apocalypticism—while looking way beyond it’ (2012b: 203). The way in which Morton looks beyond the contemporary ecological crisis is by provocatively challenging us to ‘think big’, ‘as big as possible, and maybe even bigger than that, bigger than we can conceive’ (2010: 20). Morton also invokes the cosmic in his big thinking, arguing, like Robinson, that we must place ourselves imaginatively in the context of Space: ‘Space isn’t something that happens beyond the ionosphere. We are in Space right

now' (24). He states, 'Seeing the Earth from space is the beginning of ecological thinking' (14).

But what exactly *is* the value for ecological thinking of this immense cosmic frame? Again, the insights arising from Morton's work might equally be applied to Robinson's work. In Morton's reading of a passage from John Milton's *Paradise Lost* we see the angel Raphael attempting to persuade Adam of the perils of idle speculation, which could distract his attention from 'just and temperate action' (Morton 2010: 21). Raphael uses as an example of this kind of dangerous speculation the idea that our solar system may not be unique: there may be 'other suns perhaps/ With their attendant moons' (Milton, cited in Morton 2010: 21). Morton interprets Raphael's overt argument as a ploy. By telling Adam not to think of other suns, Raphael inevitably conjures them into his mind, with the effect, Morton argues, of making Adam see human life from a perspective that radically shrinks its stature. Morton extrapolates an ecological message from this. He writes, 'If [humans] refrain from thinking that they are too important, [they] will resist Satan's setting [them up] at the centre of a universe that, like the apple, is there for the taking' (22). The result, Morton claims, is that in this expanded context we also see Satan and his temptations as diminished and ridiculous, viewing him 'as if through the wrong end of a telescope' (23).

Robinson is perhaps producing a similar effect when he asks us to carry the furthest reaches of time and space in our mind as the context of our footsteps on the earth. Though, in the light of cosmic Space, we might potentially experience what he calls 'the interlocking of all our mental and physical trajectories through all the subspaces of experience up to the cosmic' (2007: vi) and so build without contradiction our deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings, the opening of *Stones of Aran* works in reverse: we go from 320 million years, down to a century, a quarter of a mile, ending with a couple of paces—a pattern that is repeated with variations at other points in the text. Far from denoting a universe we can frame as ready for the human taking, it is one that frames us, and shrinks us against unfathomable infinities. It is indeed like looking at human dwelling through the 'wrong' end of a telescope. Thus, although Robinson is clearly genuinely interested in exploring out relationship with landscape in the context of Space, this framing can perhaps ultimately also be seen as a kind of gambit. Perhaps Robinson is not looking to build those deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings in Space after all, but has evoked this vast frame, at least in part, in order to bring us to a sharpened existential awareness, both of our contradictory and ambiguous dwelling on the earth and of the earth that sustains that

dwelling. As Robinson himself argues from the start, the 'natural reaction' (2008: 5) to such cosmic contemplation is to 'make the most out of every square foot of allotted ground' (5).

Thus, once you have zoomed out in order to see the big picture, you might find, upon zooming in again, that your perspective on the human, and on the earth, and on the place of the mortal human upon that earth, has subtly changed, and that your gaze has been returned with renewed intensity to your segment of home planet. Robinson has effected here not only an ecological sleight of hand, but perhaps also something of what island studies scholars Elaine Stratford *et al* hope for when they call for a counter-mapping of islands. It is worth reiterating their argument here: 'Such counter-mapping', they write, 'requires a double-destabilization: dislocating and destabilizing the objects of study—the fixity of island difference and particularity—and constituting in their place a site or viewing platform by which they are perceived afresh and anew' (Stratford *et al* 2011: 114). With his radical viewing platform—one that stretches from the minutiae of the island to the immensities in which it is wrapped, and travels via its far-reaching archipelagic connections—Robinson de-territorialises Árainn, only to re-territorialise it through an intensified appreciation of the ground beneath his feet.

The riddle of Robinson-on-Árainn: the paradox of islanded dwelling

As Robinson's own use of the term dwelling suggests, along with his formulation of the good step as the human equivalent of the Aran dolphins' 'moment-by-moment reintegration of body and world' (2008: 19), the question of what it means to be a human in the world is central to the Aran diptych. In certain respects, and notwithstanding the apparent undermining of the concept of 'deep-eaved Heideggerian dwellings' noted above, the picture that emerges in the books does have elements in common with conceptualisations of dwelling discussed in the Introduction to the thesis. These conceptualisations, as we have seen, build on Heidegger's concept of 'being-in-the-world' (2010: 61), in which dwelling has been interpreted as a life 'grounded in regional particularity' (Bate 2000: 234) and as 'the long-term imbrication of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work' (Garrard 2012a: 117). For Robinson, it is the island's richness in these very elements that initially renders it *the* exemplary terrain for his quest.

John Wylie argues that UK and US genres of landscape writing and nature writing—genres to which he feels Robinson is responding in his work—are deeply

influenced by such notions of dwelling, inheriting 'a complex romantic legacy in which notions of land and life existing in reciprocal harmony play a significant, if contested part' (2012: 366). He identifies in landscape writing a 'generic literary legacy of yearning and returning; nostalgia, elegy and lament' (367) that perpetuates the notion of dwelling as 'a communion of land and life, nature and culture' (367). There certainly *are* elements in the Aran books that go some way to supporting Wylie's view. Robinson, as we have seen, describes his quest for the good step as finding 'our way back to the world' (2008: 19) and as 'the mind travelling back in search of Eden' (7). These phrases do indeed suggest some element of nostalgic yearning and returning, though, as I have argued, Robinson is engaged in a process of disrupting and reframing these notions. In more mundane terms, Robinson also regrets elements of modernisation in the islands. 'The material destructiveness of modern life is only now beginning to impinge on Aran' (2008: 9), he writes and he laments the diminishing population numbers (2009: 41). In the context of geological erosion, he feels that 'Aran is a dying moment' (2009: 130). He concludes: 'Too often, in writing of Aran, I am writing elegies unawares' (2009: 278).

Wylie also sees Robinson's chosen method of walking—though acknowledging its pragmatic usefulness in fostering opportunities for 'conversing, listening and observing' (2012: 370)[4]—as drawing 'most of all on refurbished romantic registers and legacies' (370) involving the notion that walking is a means of establishing a connection with the earth, and is '*proper* to dwelling' (Wylie 2012: 371, emphasis in original). Though he sees Robinson as inhabiting romanticism 'quite knowingly and reflexively, without straightforwardly rejecting it' (371), he believes that this factor, combined with the kind of transcendental leanings associated with romanticism, invalidates the very concept of the

[4] In the interview, Robinson expanded on the practical advantages of walking over other forms of transport when trying to access local knowledge of particular landscapes—when finding out how the inhabitants 'do their island', to use Taggart and Vaninni's phrase:

> 'Walking' has been competently anatomised by several cultural theoreticians recently. Leaving those analyses aside, the practice has been essential to my method. Once a wealthy friend with a big car offered to help me in my explorations of Connemara. Since I wanted to revisit a few remote glens I accepted, and we roared off. Then, 'I must call in at that cottage,' I said, and we squealed to a stop. I knocked at the door, but apart from a twitching curtain there was no response - whereas if I had sweated up the hill, fallen off my old bike at the gate, asked for a bucket of water to mend a puncture, etc., all the lore of the valley would have been forthcoming over tea in the kitchen. But even bicycling is inferior to walking in this context. To appear out of the thickets behind an Aran cottage, or scramble down from the bare moon-mountains of the Burren into a farmyard, is, I find, a disarming approach, introducing me as obviously unofficial and dying for a cup of tea. (2014: n.p.)

good step.[5] He singles out one particular passage to support his argument, in which Robinson writes: 'Somewhere I have read of a temple built around a footprint of the Buddha, and, looking back, I see that it was a god's all-comprehending step I had in mind when I set out' (2008: 368). For Wylie, this is evidence that 'the good step could not therefore be the step of a human' (2012: 374) and is 'an impossible ideal' (374). Moreover, according to Wylie, it undermines, from within, Robinson's stated purpose:

> within the image of the good step there lurk idealist and transcendental tendencies, in the most literal sense—tendencies to rise above and become forgetful of the thickets of human and earthly circumstance that are, in the final analysis, Robinson's entire concern. (2012: 374)

For this reason, he contends, Robinson must ultimately disavow the step in order to remain true to his commitment to 'earthly circumstances'. However, he misses the force of 'when I set out'—which implies a more recent change in perspective—and fails to take account of the ongoing progression of Robinson's line of thought:

> But that footprint (is it in Ceylon?) is, I believe, the last the take-off point for transcendence, and the next one, which would complete a step, does not exist; whereas in fact the earth and its powers of healing and wounding, of affirming and contradicting, of supporting and tripping you up, can never be finished with. (2008: 368)

Thus, while the god's step takes off for the extramundane, Robinson's comes back to earth, again and again.

Contrary to Wylie's view, I would argue that Robinson actively embraces the contradictions between the attractions of the transcendental and the thickets of earthly circumstance and relishes the tensions they produce. Moreover, it is these tensions that ultimately help him to progress with his quest, as he monitors and assesses them, characteristically gesturing towards the transcendental but then immediately returning to the material ground of his existence. For example, describing the way in which certain experiences on the island can give rise to moments rich with the possibility of transcendence, he shows himself quickly returning to his earth-based explorations: 'But I soon tire of transcendental flight and start poking about again, questioning the ground I stand on' (2009: 325). Likewise, in a passage from *Pilgrimage*, entitled 'A Difficult Mile', which documents the discomforts and disillusionments involved in walking a particular stretch of the coastline, Robinson concludes that even if the cosmos did have

[5] He contrasts Robinson's good step with Tim Ingold's notion of 'wayfaring', which for Wylie does provide a context in which there is 'a certain continuum of world, body and text—of landscape, walking and writing' (2012: 372), and in which dwelling, in a more contingent, fluid form is possible.

> a meaning narrow enough to be discovered by or revealed to such infinitesimals as Man, it would be one which we, honouring ourselves as dust, should decline to read or make our own. Better to keep our eyes on the ground, our ground. (2008: 168)

Like the vast scales Robinson uses to contextualise Árainn, which reflect the kind of 'big thinking' with which ecocriticism is only now beginning to engage, these lines express what might also be considered to be a profoundly ecological perspective. At the close of *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison states that humans have lost the 'instinctive knowledge of dying' (1992: 249) and must recover the knowledge of our mortality—to speak *our* death to the world in order to avoid speaking death *to* the world. Robinson's lines here, particularly the beautifully poignant 'honouring ourselves as dust', express what might be considered to be a profoundly ecological perspective: an understanding, acceptance, and even celebration of our mortality and shared materiality with the ground we walk.

He also assesses the generic and specific romantic tropes of islandness that attach themselves to Árainn, identifying 'Rousseauistic nostalgia' (2008: 15) as a contributory element of 'the Aran spell' (15), and arguing of Flaherty's *Man of Aran* that 'his creation, ambiguously situated between documentary and mythology, yearly allures hundreds of romantic pilgrims and journalistic hacks to an island it would please them to see situated in a changeless and heroic era' (2008: 212). Robinson levels this accusation despite the fact that earlier in *Pilgrimage* he has confessed, albeit in terms of curiosity rather than full-blown romantic fervour, that it was 'a mild curiosity engendered by Flaherty's film that first brought us (my wife and myself) to Aran, in the summer of 1972' (2008:16). This is a timely reminder that Robinson is no stranger to contradiction. In fact, he describes himself at one point as a 'romantic materialist' (2008: 109), highlighting his willingness to embrace duality, to hold in balance his romantic tendencies with what might be considered, to use the phrase Brannigan applies to those he considers to be Robinson's modernist predecessors, 'resolutely material perspectives' (2014: 10).

Thus, although Wylie is right to identify romantic leanings in Robinson's work, his assertion that these ultimately undermine the notion of the good step perhaps does not do full justice to the complexity of Robinson's vision or to the fact that the step is, from the start, predicated upon contradiction and paradox.[6] Robinson states of his literary

[6] In fact, in *Labyrinth* Robinson explicitly states his enjoyment of living with uncertainty. Referring to the constellations visible in the northern hemisphere he states: 'I do not envy those with a southern hemisphere to their minds, whose night skies are certified with the Cross. Mine are queried constantly by those three constellations, the Greater, Lesser and Least Question Marks, and I like it so' (2009 [1995]: 392).

undertaking that 'when at last it is done I will have told the heedless dolphins how it is, to walk this paradigm of broken, blessed, Pangaea' (2008: 21). In other words, though on the one hand Árainn's geological links with the limestones of Europe and America establish its archipelagic interconnections, on the other they ultimately emphasise the fragmentation of the earth's continents—its brokenness. Thus the island is, for Robinson, a symbol of dislocation as much as union. He also knows that his hope for total comprehensibility is a delusion—indeed it is this very perception that draws him to the island. In a beautifully contradictory assertion, he writes: 'I was soon lured into trying to understand the island, by its promise that this project could never reach an end' (2007: 212). Thus his good step, rather than an expression of romantic yearning (though this certainly inflects the step at certain points), represents an exploration of what it means in practice to attempt to *be* in a place in circumstances predicated by the powerful contradictions of fractured island-earth and, in particular, by Árainn's beguiling yet paradoxical qualities. It acts ultimately more as an incentive to him to persist rather than an ideal he perceives as achievable. In an email correspondence, Robinson explains more about the function of the step: 'Maybe I should say that the idea of the step wears spurs, which urge me on over stone and bramble' (2015: n.p.). The island, as a paradigm of ambiguity (knowable yet unknowable; whole yet fragmented) is therefore perhaps more than ever, *the* exemplary terrain on which to explore the uncertainties of dwelling.

Furthermore, the island setting provides Robinson with objects of enquiry that are by their very nature *incomprehensible.* In *My Time in Space* he writes:

> I do believe that all things are in principle comprehensible – except two: the existence of the universe and one's own existence. These are mysteries in that one cannot even frame a question about them. About the universe, 'Why?' just directs us back into the web of interconnections constituting it; about oneself 'Why here? Why now?' is empty, as asked by an embodied-here-and-now. (2012: location 112)

This declaration perhaps sums up the paradoxical appeal of the quest for the good step for Robinson. It is a project that connects, in his view, two great mysteries—the existence of the self-aware individual human and the existence of the universe itself—mysteries which Árainn foregrounds by bringing the human self and the immensities of the cosmos into direct contact. But, as the passage above also shows, the way in which the two come together is characterised once again by contradiction and paradox: when one asks about the universe one is immediately made aware of the interconnections that constitute it rather

than its origins; when one questions one's own existence in metaphysical terms one is drawn back to the embodied here and now.

In the light of these observations, Robinson's notion of dwelling itself begins to take on a more contingent, dialectical aspect—a sense that, rather than trying to build those Heideggerian dwellings *without contradiction*, the only way to move forward with the quest is *through contradiction*. In his introduction to an edition of Synge's *The Aran Islands,* Robinson, identifies the theme of the book as a riddle—one that, he argues, remains pertinent: 'That double-natured and sphinx-like creature, Synge-on-Aran, still proposes its riddle, which is that of our own mortal stance on the earth' (1992: xxxix). Deploying the island-earth metonym, he goes on: 'Now that our planet has shrunk to an island in space […], all past efforts to unriddle our being-on-the-earth have to be reread' (xxxix). Robinson-on-Árainn takes a similar theme: the ongoing unriddling of our being-on-the-earth, and the re-reading and re-framing of existing cultural tropes and forms that have broached this subject. In the light of Robinson's comment on the necessity of re-reading of all past efforts to unriddle our being-on-the-earth, one could also argue that Robinson's text, in its at times dialogic relationship with Synge's *The Aran Islands*, is also a rereading of a past attempt to unriddle islandness. Both activities involve taking a certain interrogative approach to their subject. Thus, introducing us to the notion of the step at the beginning of *Pilgrimage,* Robinson describes it as a 'problem': 'Let the problem be symbolized by that of taking a single step […]' (2008: 20). Robinson uses this noun advisedly. He means that the good step, rather than being an answer in itself, is like a mathematical problem, a conundrum to be explored, but what emerges cumulatively throughout the diptych is that it is the formulating of the problem and the pacing around it that is valuable rather than any possible solution.

Towards the end of *Pilgrimage,* Robinson makes more explicit his sense of what the good step might mean once it is freed from the ties of nationhood and religious faith. He argues:

> With this freebooter's licence there goes every likelihood of superficiality, restlessness, fickleness and transgression—and so, by contraries, goes the possibility of recurrency, of frequentation, of a deep, an ever-deeper dwelling in and on a place, a sum of whims and fancies totalling a constancy as of stone. (2008: 364)

Thus it seems that it is only by contraries that new possibilities emerge. The freedom of the step creates the conditions for superficiality, restlessness, fickleness and transgression, but at the same time for recurrency, frequentation, and an ever-deeper dwelling in and on

Árainn. These paradoxes are, I would argue, enacted in the form of the books, in which extraordinarily detailed passages of representational writing—elements of recurrency and frequentation—rub shoulders with exclamations of absurdity, boredom and failure, and episodes of pastiche, parody, allusion and metatextual commentary that at times give the impression of restlessness, fickleness and transgression. In the section that follows I explore in more detail the implications of these apparent contradictions of tone.

The advent of psycho-archipelagraphy

A significant feature of the Aran books is the way in which Robinson marries his detailed representational writing with passages that explore his own consciousness. The 'goodness' of the good step resides not just in the kinetic phenomenology of walking—the attempt to take 'a single step as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave' (2008: 20)—but also in striving towards a 'state of consciousness even fleetingly worthy' (20) of its island ground. As we have seen, however, neither part of the equation is without its challenges. Robinson's text, like the limestone over which it travels, has sudden points of fissure requiring investigations of his own psyche, and he is not afraid to plumb these depths and to delve into the faultlines that disrupt the progress of the step. Thus, we find that his fourth visit to the great fort of Dun Aonghas has left him exasperated, 'because once again I have failed adequately to *be* in this strange place, this knot of stone from which the sky has broken out' (2008: 109, emphasis in original). Likewise, parts of the coastline frustrate him: 'Sometimes this difficult mile, from the last of the cliffs to the bay of An Gleannachán below the village of Eoghanacht, can close on the mind like a trap' (2008: 168), and other areas of the island rebuff his attempts to learn their secrets: returning to Bun Gabhal and recalling his first visit to the place he admits 'I felt then that I would never know anything of the life of that place, and so it has turned out' (2009: 594). In a deadpan parenthesis he even confesses, '(I have to admit to myself that I sometimes found Aran boring and repetitious)' (2009: 584).

This engagement with problematic psychological states is a dimension of his work that the title of the second volume of the Aran diptych, *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*, can perhaps be seen as symbolising, though moments of self-searching are common to both volumes. The title of the first book, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage,* seems to resonate with narratives of spiritual connection with the earth, and ultimately with the transcendental aspirations Wylie identifies. However, in a by now familiar contradictory move, *Labyrinth* proffers a different set of associations. Robinson describes the book as 'working its way

with incredible tortuosities through the interior' (2007: 213)—an interior that denotes not only the non-coastal parts of the island but also his own psyche. As we saw in the Introduction to the thesis, John Fowles regards the small island as bound up with and mirroring the complexity of the human—both being partially open to interpretation and partially hidden. 'Even to ourselves', he writes, 'we are the same, half superficial and obvious, and half concealed, labyrinthine, fascinating to explore' (Fowles 1978: 12). An element of Robinson's good step is to explore his own half-concealed states of consciousness as he walks his island ground.

There are other contemporary connotations of the word labyrinth, which also reflect an interest in psychological states but at the same time move away from associations with islandness. Although the original labyrinth of classical mythology—the home of the fearsome part-man, part-bull minotaur—was situated on the island of Crete, the word has attracted more urban connotations in modernity, ultimately becoming synonymous with the notion of the city and the psychological puzzles it evokes in those who walk its streets. For example, Walter Benjamin explores the tangled interiors of European cities in *Les Chemins du Labyrinthe* (2005), and states of Paris that 'the city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth' (1999: 84), and the psychogeographer Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* describes London as a 'city labyrinth' (1998: 54).

By beginning to consider Robinson's work in terms of these more urban traditions, his approach to writing about Árainn might be seen as bringing to the island the kind of literary attention that is more commonly accorded to cities—to the metropolitan 'centres' of human activity. This is a notion that is supported by some of Robinson's biographical details. In an interview with Smith, Robinson expresses a sense that when he left London in 1972 he was bringing to Árainn a kind of urban energy: 'I had an idea that all the rich and heady stuff brewed up in cities could flow out into the countryside and revivify it' (2013: 4). In the essay 'Taking Steps' Robinson suggests that the good step itself had an urban genesis: 'I know that the step […] is not some poetic flower picked of my own creative fancy by the wayside of my life, because, looking back, I see it implicit in the work I was doing in London' (2007: 213)—work that, as Robinson has stated elsewhere, was often aimed at 'bringing into consciousness London's suppressed geography' (2012: location 198).

The other major indication of Robinson's intention to bring a gaze to the island that is usually reserved for humanity's great urban works is the fact that the title of the Aran

diptych, *Stones of Aran*, is in itself an act of homage to Ruskin's *Stones of Venice,* a three volume magnum opus published between 1851 and 1853 devoted to the painstaking, stone-by-stone literary description of the architecture of that city. There are direct references to *Stones of Venice* within the text, along with a sense that Robinson is self-reflexively assessing the appropriateness of his Ruskin-inspired approach to the island, constantly measuring his own writing and the stones of Aran themselves against Ruskin's Venice. In a moment of self-searching and doubt, Robinson writes:

> Sometimes I fear that all the stones of Aran do not equal one flower-carved finial of Venice, or an uneven paving stone in San Marco. Perhaps there is nothing here but dull limestone and lumpy granite […]. (2009: 287)

And again, a later passage, which in doubly allusive fashion evokes the storm scene in *King Lear*, questions further the 'worthiness' of the Aran landscape when compared with Venice. It takes the form of an italicised internal monologue set against the backdrop of an immense storm, and finds Robinson cursing his own hubris, exclaiming:

> *That these invertebrate walls should set themselves up against the palazzo of Venice! I curse this ramified cul-de-sac of an island that has wasted half the footsteps of my life*. (2009: 540, emphasis in original)

In this moment of doubt it seems that Árainn—a 'ramified cul-de-sac'—has been found unworthy of the attention paid to it. However, as we should by now expect, this is not the end of the story, and Robinson concludes the episode with a reassertion of his commitment: 'Patience, my hand. Patience, my mind. Patience, my heart. Your book will be finished yet' (540).

The kind of writers who have employed the trope of the labyrinth, along with the sense that Robinson is bringing a gaze to the island more usually applied to the city, and the evidence that he has a deep interest in the suppressed geographies and psychological impact of place, begin to suggest that his work might be viewed in terms of urban and even psychogeographic literary traditions as much as Romantically-inflected rural landscape writing. Psychogeography, as Merlin Coverley explains, is an increasingly modish term that, however, resists easy definition: 'despite the frequency of its usage, no one seems quite able to pin down exactly what it means or where it comes from' (2010: 9). In part this reflects the difficulty of trying to define an objective method for a practice based in the subjectivity of its practitioners. Nevertheless it can be broadly conceptualised as a collection of practices of walking, observation, and writing that, while not exclusively concerned with urban settings (Richardson 2015: 6-7), is generally seen as 'the point at which psychology and geography collide, a means of exploring the behavioural impact of

urban place' (Coverley 2010: 10). It is a tradition that, of course, has its own antecedents in Romanticism, but it regards William Blake, whom Iain Sinclair describes as 'the godfather of all psychogeographers' (1997: 214), and Thomas De Quincey[7] as its progenitors rather than William Wordsworth (Coverley 2012). Blake asserts in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that 'without contraries is no progression' (1972: 149), a claim that seems peculiarly apposite to Robinson's dialectical good step.

It is not only the image of the labyrinth and the sense of urban energy flowing into the writing that links Robinson with psychogeographic traditions, and this thesis is not the first critical work to suggest that there may be a psychogeographical dimension to Robinson's work—or at least to his ambulatory method. Macfarlane raises the idea briefly in his richly suggestive introduction to *Pilgrimage* when he comments: 'Long before psycho-geography became a modish term, Robinson was out on the *dérive*[8] […]' (2009: x).[9] Smith specifically discusses Robinson's walking method in relation to Sinclair's work *London Orbital*, insightfully drawing a comparison between the methods of the two writers: 'Both defamiliarise a pre-framed landscape by walking out into it with a fresh line of enquiry' (Smith 2012: 44). In Robinson's case, his engagement is with the pre-framed landscape of an island and in Sinclair's case the M25 motorway. However, Smith, rather than pursuing a reading of the psychogeographic elements of Robinson's work, argues that both Sinclair and Robinson are engaged in the forging of an 'archipelagic literature' (2012: 5), a generously expansive term he uses to denote a broad spectrum of place-based writing that reflects the complex intertwinings of nature, culture and place.

However, there are elements of the diptych that seem to fall outside the stylistic remit of archipelagic writing and that further link Robinson with psychogeography. Recent archipelagic criticism of Robinson's work largely focuses its attention and approbation upon its qualities as a repository of local detail (see Ben Smith 2012; Jos Smith 2012, 2013) rather than its more stylistically challenging elements, or indeed its mischievous

[7] De Quincey talks of 'the mighty labyrinths of London' in *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (2003 [1821]: 38).

[8] The *dérive* is defined by Guy Debord as 'a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambience' (2006: 40), an explanation that more closely matches Robinson's resolutely passionate attentiveness to the changing ambiences of the island than Coverley's account of later psychogeographic interpretations of this form of walking as 'aimless drift and detached observation' (2010: 42).

[9] This is a connection that is also made by Stephen E Hunt in 'The Emergence of Psychoecology' in relation to other writers associated with rural rather than urban landscapes: Robert Macfarlane, Roger Deakin, Richard Mabey and Mark Cocker. For a more extensive assessment of the concept of psychoecology in this context see Marland (2015b).

humour. Coverley notes that psychogeographic writing 'also demonstrates a playful sense of provocation and trickery' (2010: 13) and that

> With roots in the *avant garde* activities of the Dadaist and Surrealists, psychogeography and its practitioners provide a history of ironic humour that is often a welcome counterbalance to the portentousness of some of its more jargon-heavy proclamations. (13)

This seems equally applicable to Robinson, whose writing makes use of subtle ploys and gambits, and whose densely descriptive passages are from time to time leavened by ironic, comic elements that undermine the 'austerely passionate' tone identified by Macfarlane (2009: xiv).

Thus, in addition to the aforementioned Lear-like dramatic monologue, we also find, for example, a metatextual, mock-pretentious dissection of Robinson's method that begins '*I interrupt myself to apologise for this topographical vagueness*' (2009: 457, emphasis in original), and a voicing of his adoptive dog Oscar's thoughts—a character who, incidentally, also doubts Robinson's ability to perfect the book of the good step (2008: 233). Robinson even composes his own 'Bad Review' (2009: 415) to demonstrate his nagging doubts about the value of his writing. This review suggests that a fundamental flaw of the work is its 'uncertainty and equivocation about its own purpose' (415). Robinson goes on:

> Striding roughshod over the bounds of specialisms and genres, it seems to imply that some overarching meaning of it all is going to be revealed through the juxtaposition or pile-up of viewpoints, but alas this higher truth never quite emerges […]. (415-6)

Wall, though insightfully characterising Robinson's work as indicative of a 'gentle carnivalesque vision' (2011: 48), completely misses the parodic nature of this 'Bad Review', taking it at face value, and stating that *Pilgrimage* 'received a negative review on publication' (48) which is 'printed in full in *Labyrinth*' (48).

It is clear, then, that the form of the Aran diptych pushes at the boundaries of existing forms of rural landscape writing and renders interpretation problematic. I would argue that in his stylistic innovations Robinson has created a new form that represents a significant intervention into the genres of landscape writing, and more specifically, into island-based literature. It brings together the Romantic and the postmodern, the archipelagic and the psychogeographic, in a kind of 'psycho-archipelagraphy'. This form offers intensely detailed representations of local place, bringing a quality of attention to the island more often reserved for great urban manifestations of human culture, while at the same time registering the sometimes disappointing impact of the landscape on the psyche of the walker and teasing the reader with trickster elements, metatextual commentary and

deceptive declarations of failure. In its focus on an island rather than a city, this psycho-archipelagraphy might reciprocally be seen as an intervention into psychogeographic literature—a returning of the trope of the labyrinth to its island origins and a commingling of the 'urban energy' Robinson brings with him to the island with the energies of the island itself.

There is an additional way in which Robinson's work might be seen as returning a trope to the island, and in the process reframing it. In the Introduction to the thesis I discussed the phenomenon of the 'Robinsonnade'—the popular form of the 'shipwreck narrative' that emerged in the century after the publication of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*—and the assessment in postcolonial studies of both the original and its later counterparts as representing archetypes of colonialism (see Loxley 1990: 3-5). The legacy of this most famous of all island novels has been interpreted quite differently in psychogeography, where the eponymous hero has been adopted retrospectively as the epitome of the psychogeographer. Coverley argues that *Robinson Crusoe*

> releases a character who not only haunts the subsequent history of the novel itself but who also provides a curious intersection with the evolution of psychogeography. As we shall see, the figure of Robinson links Defoe to Rimbaud and the flâneur as well as to more recent incarnations of the urban wanderer in the films of Patrick Keiller.[10] (2010: 15)

There is not the space or scope here to unravel the paths by which the figure of Robinson (Crusoe) is transformed in psychogeography via Arthur Rimbaud's coining of the verb 'robinsonner' ('to let the mind wander—or to travel mentally' (Coverley 2012: 66)) into the urban and suburban wanderer of Keiller's films. However it is perhaps worth noting that, in psychogeographic terms, Robinson (Crusoe) has been largely reinvented—abstracted from the original text and freed from his colonialist associations—with the emphasis now falling not upon his resourceful efforts to settle and to control the conditions of his existence, but on his role as a 'literary revenant' (Coverley, 2010: 68) and prototypical flâneur, able to 'report back from beyond the bounds of our everyday experience' (Coverley 2010: 35-6). I would suggest that Tim Robinson's psycho-archipelagraphy might offer an alternative, psycho-archipelagraphic working of the Robinsonnade[11] in which the figure of Robinson as flâneur is restored to the island, ready to devote his life to walking its ground and listening to its many voices, and able to report back with his findings.

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[10] i.e. *London* (1994), *Robinson in Space* (1997), and *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), all of which feature the journeys of a fictional character named Robinson, who is based loosely upon Defoe's Robinson Crusoe.

[11] A suggestion encouraged by the serendipitous coincidence of names.

These observations are not, however, an attempt to suggest that the psycho-archipelagraphic form's varied elements exist in easy harmony. Wylie's assertion that the more Robinson's words accumulate, the more his chosen landscapes disappear from view remains to be fully answered. The different qualities and approaches combined in the Aran diptych exist in a sometimes awkward alliance, such that, like the content of the narrative, the form itself appears quite contradictory. Moreover, with its almost unrelenting attention to detail, the work can sometimes, at least for this reader, seem, like the Árainn landscape Robinson describes, to close on the mind like a trap, to become a little boring and repetitious. It perhaps raises questions about what Robinson is actually trying to achieve in the Aran diptych. The paragraphs that follow look at the nature of Robinson's walking practice in relation to Michel de Certeau's essay 'Walking in the City' from *The Practice of Everyday Life*—a text that has been identified as a major influence on the development of theories of psychogeographic walking (Coverley 2010, 2012; Richardson 2015)—in order to try to draw out further the implications of this form and the role of the island within it.

Performing the aporia

Tina Richardson argues that in 'Walking in the City' de Certeau 'provides us with a new character in the urban story, the city itself' (2015: 8). The way in which this new character is allowed to emerge is through the spatial practices of the walker: de Certeau distinguishes between the voyeuristic view of someone looking down on the city from the top of a skyscraper and that of a person on the street itself, thus stressing the value of walking, and of maintaining an embodied connection with the ground. For de Certeau, the story begins 'with footsteps' (1999: 131), which in turn create 'a space of enunciation' (131). But this enunciation has its difficulties. The urban complexity is such that that 'in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other' (128). To mediate this otherness the walker looks for practices 'that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions' (128), and chooses methods that reflect '"another spatiality" (an "anthropological", poetic and mythic experience of space)' (128).

Robinson cannot be considered to be an ordinary practitioner of the city: he is, on the contrary, a rather extraordinary practitioner of the island, extraordinarily devoted to recording its every feature. Nevertheless, if one were to try to define his practice, elements of de Certeau's formulation would come very close. As Smith notes, 'In light of the

breakdown of that urban/rural binary that Keiller and Sinclair have recently been prompting, we can also read de Certeau in relation to a history of non-urban pedestrianism' (2012: 49). Thus, one might argue that in deploying this non-urban walking method Robinson provides us with another new character in the psychogeographical story: the island. Like de Certeau's story, Robinson's begins on the ground with footsteps, or, rather, with the good step, as he attempts to mediate the complexity and (at times) otherness of the island landscape. His circuit of the island's coastline and passage into its interior may seem initially to correspond with the kind of geographical constructions and understandings of space de Certeau rejects as totalising forces that mask the strangeness that lies beneath the threshold of immediate visibility. However, as we have seen, though Robinson's cosmic contextualisation might appear to offer the ultimate panoptic view of island-earth, its effect on Robinson is to return his gaze in an intensified form to the ground beneath his feet. His geographically-oriented explorations are frequently interrupted by the landscape's contingent geologies, vibrant biologies, and polyphonic histories, which cause Robinson to poke beneath the surface of the immediately visible ever more intently.

The Aran diptych is also at certain points, like the practice of de Certeau's walkers, anthropological, poetic, and mythic. As Robinson moves round and through the island, he is constantly accruing anthropological detail, attempting to record, as he himself states, 'the unsummable totality of human perspectives' (2000: 8) on the island. His writing is also finely-wrought, employing metaphor and allusion, and weaving into representational passages phrases of exceptional beauty and resonance. At the beginning of *Pilgrimage*, while defining his task, Robinson writes: 'a dolphin may be its own poem, but we have to find our rhymes elsewhere, between words in literature, between things in science' (2008: 19), and the work as a whole might be viewed as a literary prose poem that combines the poetic and the empirical in a rich blend. At the same time, Robinson's evocation of Árainn is, as Macfarlane notes, 'utterly mythic' (2009: x) in its imaginative scope, as it ranges over the concepts of Eden and deep time, and out to the furthest reaches of the cosmos.

But Robinson does not only evoke the mythic in these broad terms; he also embraces and reframes the particular myths that attach to Árainn itself. His final ploy, at the end of the diptych, involves a reworking of the myth of Hy Brazil. Alluding to the seventeenth century Irish historian Roderic O'Flaherty's account,[12] Robinson suggests that

[12] A description that Robinson uses as the epigraph to his final chapter—the 'Postscript' that comes at the very end of the diptych.

there lies beyond Árainn a Lesser Aran—a mythical place that fosters dangerous delusions. He complains:

> The deep truths of myth act on me less than their deep falsities; recognitions of the latter are the cruel blades that facet the world like living crystal. That one's dwelling-place in the world can be possessed as by patriarchal marriage, that there is somewhere a book containing what one needs to know, that the wound can be cured by plucking out the knife—these are some of the illusions proposed by the Lesser Aran. (2009: 607)

In a sense this is a critique of the myth of islandness itself, and of the particular attractions that initially drew Robinson to the *real* Árainn: the promise of a terrain that might be comprehensibly known;[13] the idea that it might provide him with the basis for the guidebook to the good step; the notion that we can heal the wounds we suffer as mortal beings by simply 'plucking out the knife'—by rejecting *tout court* the myths we conjure to explain to ourselves our place in this contradictory world. This last would be too easy a solution to the 'problem' of dwelling: as Robinson states at the beginning of *Pilgrimage,* to try to simplify or omit aspects of our human experience, would be 'to forgo our honour as human beings' (2008: 20), and by refusing to engage with myths we would limit our access to their deep truths as well as their falsities. However, the passage as a whole suggests that Robinson fears that he has, throughout his quest for the good step, been seeing Árainn not as itself but as its mythic counterpart.

If you stopped reading here you might well be convinced of the veracity of Wylie's assertion that in the Aran diptych the more Robinson writes, the more Aran disappears from view. But in typically dialectical fashion, Robinson continues with a passage of internal dialogue that reverses his previous observation. When he asks himself what he might want from that Lesser Aran were he to witness its appearance he realises that he has *already* found all that he could possibly ask for on Árainn itself. Listing the beauties and qualities of the island, he writes:

> But it seems I have already been expelled, ferried out hoodwink'd[14] and left back on the shores of the actual, for I am merely redescribing the Aran I have written up. (2009: 607)

Thus, in a reversal of the notion that it is the unreal, mirage of Hy Brazil that occasionally emerges from the sea, at this culmination of his quest, it seems that it is the real Árainn that has finally arisen from the mists of the mythic, and is all the more astonishing and wonderful for it.

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[13] The correlation of the possession of a place with the notion of 'patriarchal marriage' hints that Robinson might see his drive for total knowledge as at least in part spurred on by his masculinity, though this is not a theme that emerges strongly in the diptych.

[14] A reference to O'Flaherty's recounting of the story of Morogh O'Ley, a man who claimed to have visited Hy Brazil.

But even this is not quite the end of the story; though the real Árainn has reappeared, Robinson still confesses that

> The virtue of reality is that no understanding is equal to it; no walk, however labyrinthine, wears out the stone. And so, the Aran I have written myself through is inevitably the Lesser one. (2009: 608)

He remains in doubt as to the success of his broader quest for the good step. In the concluding lines of the diptych he alludes again to the seven yearly appearance of the Lesser Aran, while working in another Árainn myth—that of St Enda's arrival on the island in a stone boat—which, in turn, he combines with his cosmic framework. He writes,

> But, whether it be the terrestrial paradise, an airy illusion of clouds on the sea, or the work of delusive spirits, I have brought back a book as proof I was there. Perhaps when I open it in seven years' time it will tell me what I had hoped to learn by writing it, how to match one's step to the pitch and roll of this cracked stone boat of a cosmos; but for time being I cannot read it. (608)

There is a final correspondence with de Certeau's walkers here. As de Certeau's 'Wandersmänner' (1999: 128) move through the city their bodies 'follow the thick and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it' (128). This chimes with Robinson's mantra for his cartographic method, which, as we have already seen, involves a complex intertextual exchange between self and world, but the notion that the walkers inscribe a text that they are unable to read also resonates with Robinson's declaration that, though he has come back with an actual book, for the time being he cannot read it. It is up to us, the readers, to make sense of what he has done. But what *are* we to make of the quest for the good step? How are we to read this psycho-archipelagraphy?

Wylie identifies the central difficulty (and at the same time the central significance) of the text as resting in the contradiction between what he sees as Robinson's goal—that 'the good step would *be* the landscape' (2012: 374, emphasis in original)—and his interpretation of Robinson's finding: 'the *impossibility* of such a fusion' (375, emphasis in original). For this reason he identifies the notion of the good step as an 'aporia', which, drawing on Jacques Derrida, he defines as 'a figure of doubt, contradiction and dislocation that haunts from within any ontological claim' (375). He explains his application of this term further, stating that

> As aporia, therefore, the good step presents an image of unity and unification that is impossible, and that unravels from within the communion of land and life it purportedly expresses. The good step, supposedly an articulation of the quintessence of dwelling, in actuality *displaces dwelling.* (375, emphasis in original)

What strikes one about this observation is that, on these terms, islandness might similarly be seen as aporetic: the form and size of the small island renders it a paradigm of

wholeness and unity—bounded, knowable, mappable—but this holistic image is an illusion that in effect displaces the actual island. However, as we have seen, Robinson is always aware that his notion of the 'comprehensible totality' of the island is delusory. The two central mysteries that underpin his exploration and frame the diptych—the existence of the universe and the existence of the self—are by their very nature *incomprehensible* and therefore render the quest impossible from the start on *these* terms. And what emerges from Robinson's pursuit is a more subtle sense in which the very attempt to engage with these impossible, existential questions somehow facilitates a return to the shores of the actual, paradoxically directing us back both to the myriad interconnections that constitute place, and to one's relationship with it in the embodied here-and-now.

John Caputo, in his analysis of Derrida's aporia of hospitality, perhaps provides us with an explanation that sheds further light on the nature of Robinson's work, both in terms of how he might have achieved this counter-intuitive result and why he cannot read the book that has documented it. Caputo writes:

> The aporia is not conceptually resolved by a bit of intellectual adroitness, but strained against performatively by an act of generosity, by a giving which gives beyond itself, which is a little blind and does not see where it's going. (1997: 112)

For Robinson, the good step, and by association the island, is an aporia that cannot be resolved by intellectual adroitness; it is not a simply matter of objective knowledge, though he doggedly tries to accrue information throughout his walking, but also an experience which he, in an act of generosity which gives beyond itself, enacts for the reader in a text he himself cannot read. It is an act of giving that depends on the giver's genuine uncertainty as to what is to come, and, as we have seen, Robinson's journey is marked by contradiction and doubt. Moreover, it is a conundrum that he strains against performatively. As *Pilgrimage* draws to a close, Robinson writes of 'Having now acted out to the best of my capacity the impossibility of interweaving more than two or three at a time of the millions of modes of relating to a place […]' (2008: 363), suggesting that he himself views the work as performative rather than purely descriptive.

This notion of performance is perhaps less like Lisa Fletcher's understanding of the term, in the context of island studies, as foregrounding 'an appreciation of the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between places and the ways in which they are depicted' (2011a: 27), and more like a theatrical performance, in which the actors are the medium for presenting a text which must then be interpreted by the audience. In this it chimes to some extent with Phillip Vanini and Jonathan Taggart's call for accounts of islandness that

answer the question 'how do you do your island?' (2013: 235)—accounts that emerge through ways in which the islanders go about their island lives. Ultimately, and generous to a fault, Robinson has acted out how he 'does his island', giving us 'Robinson-on-Árainn', a performance that finds the author writing himself through his interaction with the island (and, as he confesses, with the myths of islandness associated with the 'lesser Aran') but also, through his passionate attentiveness to its geologies, biologies and histories, allowing the island to write itself through him.

Conclusion

This chapter began by noting the apparent discrepancy between the views of Wylie and Macfarlane on the nature of the achievement of the Aran diptych, with one seeing the work as a disavowal of dwelling through the revelation of the aporia of landscape, and the other as an investigation of the difficulties and rewards of dwelling enacted through an expression of deep entanglement with place. As we have seen, while my conclusions strongly favour Macfarlane's interpretation, there is undoubtedly also a sense in which the moments of dislocation Wylie identifies *can* be seen to be a significant component of Robinson's exploration of being-in-the-world. My reading has sought to mediate between these two perspectives by bringing to the discussion a new focus on the dialectical and performed nature of the step, and on the integrally contingent and contradictory nature of Robinson's evocation of dwelling. Throughout the chapter I have investigated the role of Árainn itself in fostering these innovatory perspectives. I have suggested that the qualities of islandness that have emerged provide ecocriticism with a framework in which we are able to move conceptually between the local and the global—a flexibility that may prove useful in the consideration of contemporary environmental issues—and also facilitate the kind of 'thinking big' that looks beyond even the powerful eschatologies of our era. At the same time, I have suggested that Robinson's cosmic framing of the island is, to some degree, a gambit, which has the effect, ultimately, of returning our attention with renewed vigour to the segment of home planet we inhabit: a trajectory that, again, provides ecocriticism with a potentially helpful model, in the sense that it may, as Robinson notes, foster an attitude to the earth that involves treading more lightly upon it. I have also argued that the Aran diptych represents a significant intervention into the genres of landscape writing, psychogeography, and, more specifically, island writing: a psycho-archipelagraphy that, while it incorporates aspects more commonly found in urban-based

literary works, arises from and is shaped by the energies and paradoxical qualities of the island itself.

In terms of Robinson's final question, as to whether we can in fact match our step to the cracked stone boat of the cosmos, Wylie concludes that 'It can't be done […]' (2012: 379). For me, however, the abiding sense after a reading of Robinson's work is that there is no *definitive* answer either way; indeed, it is this very uncertainty that constitutes the great strength of the work. John Haffenden, in a biography of the poet and critic William Empson, cites a note Empson wrote for the poem 'Bacchus': ''Life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis'' (Empson, cited in Haffenden, 2009: 212). In a review of this biography, Adam Phillips writes of Empson:

> We should not be trying to resolve the contradictions, the conflicts in our lives, he believed; rather, we should 'straddle' them. We are carried along by these difficulties we have and the art of living was not, in Empson's striking view, to try to solve them, which, in any case, is impossible, but to formulate them as incisively as possible. This is what he thought great literature did for us and why it was worth our attention.' (2005: n.p.)

In the Aran diptych, Robinson's formulates the 'problem' of the good step in as incisive a manner as possible, and considers those great abstractions, humanity and the world, without reaching after a definite answer as to the nature of their existence. Instead, with courage and generosity, he maintains himself between the contradictions involved in being-human-in-the-world, straddling the conflicts that emerge with the good step—a step that, regardless of the difficulties of the journey, returns to the earth again and again.

By Empson's measure, then, the Aran diptych is a great work of literature, and, I would add, a great work of island literature—one that brings the utmost degree of attentiveness to the island's own histories. The work as a whole constitutes a performance of islanded dwelling that allows Árainn to exist in a paradoxical form: to be *the* exemplary terrain upon which to ponder the good step, but at the same time to be contradictory, enigmatic, aporetic. In the end it is less important to know whether the quest to achieve a state of consciousness adequate to its island ground has succeeded, than to have made the attempt. And it is an attempt that we, as readers, have made in tandem with Robinson—we have taken the sometimes difficult but ultimately highly rewarding journey involved in reading the book that he has brought back to the world but cannot himself read. When I asked Robinson if he thought he had achieved the adequacy he sought he answered, in his

characteristically contradictory manner, ‘Adequacy is for angels’ (2014: n.p.). As for the rest of us, well, here we are, as always, faced with the next step.

Chapter 2

Choreographies, chorographies, and twenty thousand saints: the multiple islandnesses of Bardsey (Ynys Enlli)

THERE IS NEVER an end.
Nothing ever finishes, we flow like wine,
generation into generation, not dying;
we flow and break new shapes,
new forms out of archaic moulds.
–Brenda Chamberlain, Acting script of *The Protagonists*

Some say that energy
vibrates, that stuff's made up of superstrings,
that physicists study harmony
and that particles aren't billiard balls, things,
but notes, all matter a coherent song
for many voices
–Gwyneth Lewis, *A Hospital Odyssey*

Fragments of her voyage go on singing.
–Christine Evans, 'Brenda and the Golden Snake'

Introduction: Bardsey

Chapter 1 focused on Tim Robinson's *Stones of Aran* books and his literary interrogation and performance of the 'good step', the motif he uses throughout the diptych to ground his exploration of being human in the world. The sense of dwelling that emerged from Robinson's psycho-archipelagraphy (a form fostered by the qualities of Árainn itself) was contingent and dialectical, characterised by the interplay of connection and disconnection, and driven forward by a sense of contradiction and paradox. Chapter 2 travels eastwards to Bardsey island (Ynys Enlli), off the Llŷn peninsula in north-west Wales, and investigates two more texts in which an island plays a central role: Brenda Chamberlain's hybrid prose work *Tide-race* (1996 [1962]) and Christine Evans' poetry collection *Island of Dark Horses* (1995). Chamberlain, who died in 1971, was resident on Bardsey between 1947 and 1961, and based *Tide-race* on her experiences on the island. Evans first visited Bardsey in 1968, married an islander, and since then has spent the summer months of every year there. *Island of Dark Horses* is her poetic response to the island, and royalties from sales of the work are donated to the Bardsey Island Trust to assist in its work, as

Evans states, 'to salvage what is left of the traditional way of life of this unique community'.[1]

Like Chapter 1, this chapter considers the insights that ecocritical approaches might bring to the study of islandness and, reciprocally, assesses the implications for ecocriticism of the forms of islandness that emerge. It carries out a reading of the texts through the lens of material ecocriticism—a broadly posthumanist strand of contemporary ecocritical thought that, as noted in the Introduction to the thesis, draws upon the insights of the new materialisms. This area of research emphasises the shared materiality of the human and the nonhuman and stresses the vibrancy and agency of matter (Bennett 2010), seeing it as continually engaged in 'intra-actions' (Barad 2008: 128) and 'choreographies of becoming' (Coole and Frost 2010: 10). In this ontology, nature and culture are inextricably intertwined—a notion usefully encapsulated in Donna Haraway's compound noun 'naturecultures' (2003: 1) [2]—and landscape becomes an 'atlas of these relational choreographies' (Iovino 2012: 61). Bardsey is extraordinarily rich in both nature and culture, and so, to paraphrase Robinson's rationale for choosing Árainn for his exploration of the 'good step', it is perhaps *the* exemplary terrain for an investigation of the ways in which a sense of material immersion, nonhuman agency, and naturalcultural entanglement emerges in its literature.

Bardsey is roughly 1.6km long and 1km wide, and lies around 3km off the Welsh coast, separated from the mainland by a passage of water (Bardsey Sound) through which a fierce 'tide race' runs. Its Welsh name, Ynys Enlli, translates as 'Island of the Currents' (Macfarlane 2008: 23), though Evans suggests the possibility that it is 'not a topographical reference at all but an echo of Benlli' (2008: 135), a legendary warlord said to have taken up residence on the island in the 5th century. The semantic roots of its Anglophone name are also ambiguous, 'Bardsey' being perhaps of Norse origin, meaning Bardr's Isle (Chitty 1992: 21) and named after a tenth century Viking attacker/occupier of the island (Evans 2008: 135), or Saxon, meaning 'Island of the Bards' (Lewis 1849: n.p.). The very fact of its naming suggests the possibility of multiple identities, and, as Damian Walford Davies notes, establishes the island's status as 'culturally contested space' (2012: 83). In addition to its plural semantic identities, Bardsey also presents two distinct physical aspects. A mountain, Mynydd Enlli, rises up on the eastern side, effectively blocking the view of the

[1] A phrase Evans includes as a quotation on the dedication page of *Island of Dark Horses,* presumably from the literature of the Bardsey Island Trust itself.

[2] A term adopted in material ecocriticism e.g. See Iovino and Oppermann (2014: 5).

mainland from most of the island's settlement, which is focused on the gentle slopes of the western side. The island's rocks are pre-Cambrian, a mix of sedimentary and volcanic, some 'partly metamorphosed and partly intruded by various basalts and granites' (Gillham 2004: 214). It supports a rich collection of flora and fauna, including a breeding colony of up to sixteen thousand Manx shearwaters and a population of Atlantic grey seals, and traces of human habitation date from as early as the Mesolithic Stone Age (Evans 2008: 69-70).

One of Bardsey's most significant cultural attributes is its association, from early medieval times, with matters of the spirit. By 500AD it was already known as *ynys sanctaidd* (island of the saints) and as *insula sanctorum* (island of sanctuary) (Evans 2008: 73). A monastic community was established there in the 6th century (Stephens 1998: 38), followed by an Augustinian priory (St Mary's Abbey) founded in the 13th century, which then contributed significantly to the island's ongoing status as a major destination for pilgrims. In 1537, during the dissolution of the monasteries, the abbey was almost completely destroyed, apart from its tower, and the island was abandoned by the monks (Bryant-Quinn 2006: 703).[3] *The Life of Saint Elgar of Ynys Enlli* (*Vita Sancti Elgari*)[4], is an account recorded by Caradoc of a late 11th /early 12th century monastic inhabitant of the island, and is the source of several aspects of Bardsey's enduring cultural legacy. The story states that the island is called 'the Rome of Britain on account of the duration and danger of travel to it […] and, on account of the sanctity and integrity of the place' (Jankulak and Wooding 2010: 43). According to Caradoc, these dual attributes of sanctity and integrity have a very specific source:

> Its sanctity is due to the 20,000 bodies of saints buried there, both confessors and martyrs; its integrity is due to the fact that it is surrounded on all sides by the sea and has a lofty promontory on its eastern side, with its western coast level and fertile with soil irrigated by a sweet fountain, with the maritime part full of dolphins. (43)

The passage highlights the way in which, from early in its written history, the island's materiality and cultural status are intertwined: the account gives as much weight to the

[3] Bardsey's spiritual associations have, however, weathered the centuries, resurfacing in more recent times. The monastic historian Derwas Chitty led pilgrimages to the island in the mid-20th century (Wooding 2010a: xv), a modern-day hermit – Sister Helen Mary – lived on the island between 1977 and 1992 (xvi), and the island is still regarded as a site for pilgrimage and retreat. See for example the advertisement for Bardsey as a destination for contemporary pilgrims on the 'Pilgrim Routes' website (http://www.pilgrimroutes.com/walks-of-interest/bardsey-island-pilgrimage.aspx), and the banner on another website devoted to tourism on the island as 'Bardsey Island – Gateway to Heaven'(http://www.aandp.co.uk/bardseyisland/).

[4] A text written in Latin and included in the 12th century *Book of Llandaff (Liber Landavensis)* and cited here in translation by Karen Jankulak and Jonathan Wooding (2010).

island's physical features—its isolated location, imposing topography, fresh water, fertile earth and seas rich in marine life—as to its sanctity.

In stating the reason for the island's sanctity, Caradoc's story contains the first iteration of the now ubiquitous legend that twenty thousand saints are buried on the island (Jankulak and Wooding 2010: 16). Although this figure is 'presumably symbolic' (Bryant-Quinn 2006: 703), the island *was* an important site of burial in medieval times. The island's spiritual associations have thus had a significant naturalcultural, material result[5]: the ubiquity of human bones in the island earth. According to the Victorian journalist M. Dinorben Griffith, who dubbed Bardsey 'Island of the Dead', 'every turn of the spade [gives] evidence of mortality' (1899: n.p.) and 'the whole island is a graveyard' (n.p.). Interestingly, Caradoc's record of Elgar's words suggests the possibility that these interred saints are not always 'resting' in the earth: Elgar describes being visited in his isolation, in a manner that seems to go against established doctrine, by 'Holy spirits, taking upon themselves by the will of God the form of corporeal beings, notwithstanding the belief, as scripture states, that spirits do not have flesh nor bone' (Jankulak and Wooding 2010: 44-5). This is an early indication, perhaps, that experiences on the island might disrupt existing ontologies.

It is not only Christian saints who are reputed to be buried on the island. Bardsey features in Welsh versions of the Arthurian legends, and has been identified (as, of course, have several other locations) as the holy isle of Avalon (the 'Isle of Apples'), the final resting place of King Arthur and Merlin (Barber and Pykitt 1997). Legend has it that the dying Arthur was rowed to the island in a black barge by three maidens dressed in white samite and that Merlin is buried there surrounded by the thirteen treasures of Britain (Evans 2008). More factually-based historical records note that the island has continued to be populated over the centuries, though sometimes sporadically. However, the 19th century saw a phase of concerted development: a lighthouse was built in 1821 by Trinity House, and in the 1870s the third Lord Newborough, the owner of the island at the time, built ten farmhouses and encouraged a new generation of settlers to make their home there. A new chapel was also built at this time, and a Celtic cross was erected in the churchyard near to the ruined abbey, with a text that commemorates the dead and perpetuates the legend of the saints. Its inscription reads, 'Respect the remains of 20,000 saints buried nearby: *in hoc loco requiescant in pace*'. The island's population fluctuated during the 20th century,

[5] A phenomenon that can be seen as corroborating Lisa Fletcher's sense of 'the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between places and the ways in which they are depicted' (2011a: 27).

dwindling to its current level of single figures in the winter months. Most of the farmhouses are now let as holiday houses in the summer months, a scheme administered by the Bardsey Island Trust.

What makes Bardsey almost uniquely suited to a comparison, via material ecocriticism, of its literary mappings in two different texts, is the fact that the writers are responding to a set of relatively consistent physical features contained within the apparently bounded space of a small island, and to a range of persistent and shared cultural associations: in other words to a microcosmic natureculture. Thus, both Evans and Chamberlain refer to the waters of the Sound; the rocks; the seals; Lord Newborough's farmhouses; the ruined abbey; the association of the island with Avalon; Elgar and the legend of the twenty thousand saints; and the presence of human bones in the island earth. Their island lives are punctuated by the nocturnal cries of the shearwaters and the beam of the lighthouse, and through the apparently permeable barriers of island time, they both hear the plainsong of the ancient monks. There is also a curiously strong human/material connection between the two texts. This is not just because Evans responds directly to Chamberlain in a poem entitled 'Brenda and the Golden Snake', but also because some of Chamberlain's 'characters' in *Tide-race* are the thinly disguised versions of actual islanders who became, years later, Christine Evans' close relations after she married into a Bardsey family.[6]

Overview: Choreographies, chorographies and twenty thousand saints

As already noted, the theoretical backdrop to this chapter is drawn from the emergent field of material ecocriticism. It brings into play the two complementary approaches outlined by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2012) and discussed in the Introduction to the thesis. The first focuses on the ways in which 'matter's (or nature's) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual)' (Iovino and Oppermann 2012: 79), and the second explores 'matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions' (79). This chapter draws upon these approaches in order to investigate the ways in which the writers reflect a sense of the vibrancy and agentic capacities of the island world, as well as the perhaps less explicit manner in which matter's narrative power and its 'co-emerging interactions' with human lives come to light in the

[6] Chamberlain's characters Jacob and Rhiannon Lloyd, real-life islanders Wil and Nellie Evans (Walford Davies 2012: 83), became Evans' parents-in-law when she married her husband Ernest Evans.

texts. This dual theoretical approach is informed by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's new materialist notion of 'choreographies of becoming' (2010: 10), and by Iovino's development of this concept in terms of seeing landscape as an 'atlas of these relational choreographies' (2012: 61).

Coole and Frost characterise these choreographies as involving 'cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating' (2010: 10), as well as, on a smaller scale,

> objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environments in ways which are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes. (10)

It is a complex formulation, but one that above all emphasises the vitality of all matter and its involvement in ongoing processes. Summing up the ecocritical implications of these views, Iovino and Oppermann state, 'On this conceptual horizon, the world's vibrant materiality appears as a "web teeming with meanings" in which humans, nonhumans, and their stories are tied together' (2014: 5).

A significant strand of material ecocriticism has been the interpretation of these meanings via ecophenomenological perspectives. David Abram, whose work provides a touchstone for this strand, sees the earth as a 'densely intertwined and improvisational tissue of experience' (2010: 143) in which nonhuman intelligence and imagination are always immanent, and believes that we as humans should tune 'our animal senses to the sensible terrain' (3) and participate in the 'breathing flesh of the world' (38). Wendy Wheeler, whose ecophilosophy has also been a key influence on material ecocriticism, similarly characterises humans as 'embodied and enworlded creatures' (2006: 91) with minds that are 'common, shared and shareable things' (91), immersed in a more-than-human world replete with its own forms of biosemiotic signification. Drawing on these perspectives, the first section of the discussion of each respective writer's work focuses on exploring the text's depictions of the vibrant materiality and myriad biosemiotic voices of the island world, and the ways in which the writer appears to resist the tropes of islandness in order to remain in contact with the island's material realities.

As we have seen, though, in Coole and Frost's definition of choreographies of becoming, subjectivities are seen as emerging 'hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes' (2010: 10), and applying the second of Iovino and Oppermann's approaches reveals a more complex, ambiguous picture. In terms of human subjectivities, it could be the case that certain organic or social processes actually

undermine our harmonious immersion: darker phenomenologies, for example, and persistent and problematic cultural legacies. Wheeler herself identifies Western metaphysics as perpetuating dualistic habits of thought that undermine our sense of enworldedness, both in terms of their 'expulsion of the body and experiential knowledge' and their preservation of the 'human-nature, subject-object, distinction itself' (2006: 91). While Bardsey may be brimming with more-than-human vitality, it also carries particularly powerful cultural associations, which may intensify the hold of metaphysics over the writers and militate against the possibility of a wholly immersive response.

These more problematic interractions might be seen as complicating the notions of material kinship and agency that inform material ecocriticism, perhaps exemplifying Hannes Bergthaller's contention that 'sharp ontological and ethical distinctions can emerge *immanently,* as a result of material self-organization' (2014: 40, emphasis in original). In order to establish an identifying term for this more complex interplay of nature and culture, and the more ambiguous 'co-emerging interactions' in the works under discussion, I have drawn upon the existing concept of 'chorographies', and use this as the title for the second section of discussion of each respective text. The word chorography dates back to the 16th century and is defined as 'the verbal-cartographic depiction of a bounded, particular place' (Walford Davies 2012: 45). Walford Davies uses the term to denote the way in which certain accounts of place are culturally-inflected, personalised and particularised, and in his detailed and insightful exploration of Chamberlain's oeuvre, he describes *Tide-race* as a 'hybrid chorography' (2012: 102). I would argue that both Chamberlain and Evans are particularist and chorographic in their approach, not only in terms of their sustained focus on Bardsey, but also in their subjective interpretations of their experience of the island—sometimes as a means by which they interrogate their own identities—and in the manner in which they negotiate the cultural legacies of the place.

These chorographic responses to the island do not in themselves necessarily contradict a material reading, and the use of the concept of chorography here denotes an augmentation of, rather than a departure from, the notion of choreographies of becoming. Indeed, new materialists might see all of the aspects of the chorographic representation as being contained within the same material continuum, since nature and culture are co-constitutive and 'there is no definitive break between material and spiritual phenomena' (Coole and Frost 2010: 10). However, in the Bardsey texts there is some tension between the writers' apprehension of the island's agency and vibrancy and the ways in which, to

varying degrees, its powerful cultural associations and the tropes of islandness more generally, begin to disrupt their engagement with the material island.

This is a tension that emerges most clearly in the writers' negotiation of Bardsey's association with death. In his Bardsey-based poem, 'Pilgrimages', R. S. Thomas expresses a sense of the enduring presence and ongoing influence of the island's dead. 'There is an island there is no going to', he writes

> but in a small boat the way
> the saints went, travelling the gallery
> of the frightened faces of
> the long-drowned, munching the gravel
> of its beaches. (1998: 364)

The lines suggest that the dead saints (both real and symbolic), along with those pilgrims who perished in the attempt to reach the island, have left a legacy that is almost impossible to side-step. Bardsey's status as an 'Island of the Dead', along with the more-than-usually evident presence of human remains in its earth, means that both Chamberlain and Evans are confronted with a powerful and insistent *memento mori*. Hence, the third section of the discussion of each respective text is entitled 'Twenty thousand saints', and focuses on the ways in which Chamberlain and Evans deal with the question of mortality.

Again, the idea of mortality is not one that necessarily negates a sense of enworldedness and material immersion; a new materialist reading might conceptualise death as the ultimate expression of our shared materiality with the nonhuman world and of our ongoing material participation in choreographies of becoming. This certainly appears to be Abram's view, though he does acknowledge its challenges. In *Becoming Animal* he speaks of the human body's vulnerability to 'disease, decay and death' (2010: 6), and of the material world as a place where 'predation, sudden pain, and racking loss' (6) are prevalent features. Nevertheless, in his earlier essay 'Out of the Map, Into the Territory', he proposes 'an ecological, postmodern interpretation of death' (1995: 97):

> Death, then, might be interpreted as that moment when the central equilibria of the body begin to break down, the moment at which this field of recursive relations no longer maintains itself as something relatively separate or autonomous, but instead begins to open outward into the larger field of relations—into the soils, the waters and the air […]. (98)

From this perspective death can be seen as the starting point for an even greater participation in the flesh of the world than we might achieve in life.

In contrast to Abram's interpretation of death, in *The Dominion of the Dead* (2003) Robert Pogue Harrison gives a reading of mortality that foregrounds its role in establishing

the distinctive nature of human being-in-the-world. He argues that, unlike animals, humans live always in the conscious knowledge of the inevitability of death, in a culture that, he argues, is 'through and through necrocratic' (2003: ix). For Harrison, our forebears exert an ongoing power over us, enacted through their cultural perpetuation, which in itself is an integral element in the establishment of our dwelling places on the earth. They remain with us in a multiplicity of ways, hounding us 'with guilt, dread and a sense of responsibility', compelling the living 'to serve the interests of the unborn' and to 'keep the story [of humanity] going' (ix). Such a perspective, emphasising as it does the consciousness of our own future mortality and the persistent cultural presence of the dead long after they have been received back into the earth, resonates strongly with R. S. Thomas' evocation of the dead saints and of the drowned faces that munch the gravel of Bardsey's beaches. It is a view that might be seen as tipping the natural-cultural balance in favour of culture and militating strongly against the possibility of a deep ecological sense of material immersion in the world.[7]

I turn now to readings of *Tide-race* and *Island of Dark Horses*, structured, as noted, around initial discussion of the writers' receptivity to the island's vibrant choreographies, followed by an exploration of their more culturally-inflected, particularist chorographies, and finally by an assessment of whether their response to the legend of the twenty thousand saints and to the presence of human remains in the island earth can be seen as either playing into a sense of material immersion or pushing against it. By carrying out a reading through the lens of material ecocriticism, the chapter explores the correspondences between *Tide-race* and *Island of Dark Horses,* and also the ways in which they draw apart.

Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race:* setting the scene

Tide-race defies generic classification, combining personal memoir with passages of descriptive nature-writing, flights of mythological fantasy, poetry, and drama[8], along with Chamberlain's own distinctive illustrations.[9] Even the strand of memoir cannot be classed as entirely non-fictional. Walford Davies calls the work a 'fabling autobiography' (2013: xiii), and cites Anthony Conran's perception that Chamberlain's work was 'an exercise in "invent [ing] her own life"' (2012: 99). However, notwithstanding Chamberlain's adoption

[7] See Marland (2014a) for an extended account of Harrison's view of death and its applicability to the Bardsey texts.
[8] The island inhabitants—though based on real people (see Walford Davies 2012)—are listed (under pseudonyms) at the beginning of the book like *dramatis personae.*
[9] The first edition of *Tide-race* featured colour reproductions of Chamberlain's illustrations. This chapter focuses on the written elements of the book*,* but there is evidently scope for further academic study of the interplay between the different artistic and literary media she adopted.

of various media and the hybrid form of her writing, Walford Davies suggests that her works do have an identifiable common theme—one that has particular significance for this thesis. He sees in Chamberlain's whole oeuvre a compulsion to reflect 'on boundaries, both hard and permeable, on the condition of 'islandness'' (2013: xiii).

It is certainly clear from the opening sentences onwards, that Bardsey plays a significant role in *Tide-race*. The first chapter begins, 'Listen: I have found the home of my heart. I could not eat: I could not think straight any more; so I came to this solitary place and lay in the sun' (1996: 16), statements that immediately establish both Chamberlain's close personal identification with the island and her sense of its isolation. It is also immediately evident that the 'condition of islandness' she investigates is complex and multi-faceted. The passage goes on:

> Six miles across the Sound from the white village lies the sea-crag to which three pilgrimages equal one to Rome. At the ruined abbey of Saint Mary I will pray for the souls of my friends. The treasures of Britain are to be found in the fertile earth or in the fields or in the bays of the southwest or in the seal-cave to the east; for Merlin buried or planted here in some secret place certain mystical properties. If they can be found, you shall learn from them. (16)

The opening instruction could be seen as an immediate enactment of Harrison's idea that the dead live on culturally and make demands upon us. With the imperative 'Listen' Chamberlain compels those of us who live on after her to hear her posthumous voice. What follows is a dizzying mix of the island's historical, mythical, spiritual and physical attributes—a powerful example of a multi-stranded 'natureculture'. We are given a glimpse of the island's rocks, fertile earth, fields, bays and the seal-cave, and an idea of the writer's sensuous engagement with the place.

These elements are also, however, coloured from the start by Chamberlain's own emotional state, and by a susceptibility to cultural influences that pre-date her physical engagement with the island. Her description of Aberdaron (which faces Bardsey across the Sound) as 'the white village' and the island as 'the sea-crag' immediately suggest a mythologizing or romanticising tendency. She is also clearly invoking the island's spiritual history. Bardsey as a 'solitary place' conjures up the historical tradition of monastic retreat (i.e. a place of 'solitaries'), and she reiterates the widely-reported belief that three pilgrimages to the island equalled one to Rome. The 'ruined abbey of St Mary' refers to the remains of the Augustinian Priory on the island. Even the mention of 'fertile earth' may be in part an allusion to Elgar's story, and her appreciative reporting of the mix of island features can perhaps be seen as mirroring his sense of the island's sanctity and

integrity. Chamberlain is also invoking the mythical associations of the island: Bardsey as Avalon, where Merlin buried the thirteen treasures of Britain. The passage as a whole, then, puts forward a multi-stranded islandness that shows the writer engaged in negotiating and synthesising Bardsey's rich natureculture and broader tropes of islandness. I begin my reading by outlining some of the ways aspects of the material island and its many voices and agencies are foregrounded, before addressing some of the island's more complex naturalcultural entanglements.

Choreographies I

A passage early on in *Tide-race* that describes the ancient island rocks seems, at least at first sight, to represent a particularly powerful articulation of shared materiality. Chamberlain writes:

> At this northern end are black sea caverns. Above the caves the rock is white and worked over in raised veins, polished and fine as ivory. Some of these rock-veins were thin as spider web, others were thick as human arteries. The stone would seem to be composed of petrified tissues, skin, muscle, delicate bones. We ran our fingers over the filigree patterns. Falling to our knees we touched the remains of our ancestors. Or their sculptured memorials in stone; their ivory-bright, bird-bone perfection, the metamorphosed flesh. (1996: 26)

The sense of what is metaphor and what is not, what is rock and what is human, blurs to the point of inextricability here. The rock is seen as possessing its own veins, then as being apparently composed of petrified bodies. Finally, it is presented as the repository of the metamorphosed flesh of our ancestors. Chamberlain is perhaps playing upon the idea of the rocks being 'metamorphic' in the geological sense, and also alluding to theories of the early evolution of life on earth, in which our ancestors did indeed come from the sea, their bodies enfolded into geological strata (see Ellis 2003). In touching the rock, Chamberlain is connecting with a tangible, layered, and ancient material narrative that utterly blurs the distinction between human and nonhuman, sentient and non-sentient.

Chamberlain not only evokes this kind of shared materiality, but also presents us with a vision of a vibrant island world with its own forms of agency. From the very beginning she leaves us in no doubt about the power of the sea. It interweaves with and punctuates the narrative—'there is no escape from the raving of wind and water' (1996: 13)—and its force is never underestimated or forgotten: 'Life on this, as on every small island, is controlled by the moods of the sea; its tides, its gifts, its deprivations' (14). Within this vital medium, the island itself is characterised as an agentic force, moving towards its visitors through a, for once, calm sea: 'It was so calm that we seemed not to be

moving; it was the island that swung slowly round to meet us out of the blue ocean' (19). Chamberlain develops this idea of animation further as she describes her boat drawing closer to the island, moving in 'until the fangs of wet rock were snapping at us' (20). Again, the rocks are seen as active and self-determining.

These apparently metaphoric descriptions of natural phenomena employ a variety of 'morphisms': the sea and wind are described as 'raving' and having 'moods' and the island is seen as swinging round to meet its visitors—two examples of anthropomorphism—and the rocks are zoomorphised as having fangs and snapping. Rather than being dismissed as evidence of anthropocentric cultural tendencies, in which the nonhuman world is always read in terms of human interest, literary devices such as these have attracted recent ecocritical attention, with anthropomorphism in particular undergoing something of a conceptual rehabilitation. Jane Bennett for example, suggests that

> A touch of anthropomorphism […] can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. (2010: 99)

Similarly Richard Kerridge argues that anthropomorphism can be valuably flexible—'a matter of constantly shifting boundaries' (2014: 54).

This valuing of metaphoric forms is perhaps all the more pertinent in the light of established work by the linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999, 2003), and the reflections on recent advances in neuroscientific understanding in the work of Iain McGilchrist (2010), all of which suggest that the ability to metaphorise is an embodied response much like the other senses. Lakoff and Johnson argue that 'Metaphor is as much part of our functioning as our sense of touch and as precious' (2003: 239), and McGilchrist draws our attention to the roots of the term itself: 'The word metaphor implies something that carries you across an implied gap (Greek *meta-* across, *pherein* carry)' (116). He contends that our sense of the commonality of the ideas, perceptions or entities brought into conjunction in a metaphor does not lie in a subsequent comparison of their similarity but in a 'single kinaesthetic experience more fundamental than either' (2010: 117) that bridges the gap between them. The metaphoric expression of this single kinaesthetic experience offers us a non-dichotomous mode of representing our complex reality, and is, furthermore, 'fundamental to our understanding of the world' (McGilchrist 2010: 115). In a paraphrase of Abram's now well-established concept of the 'more-than-human', I would argue that metaphors, such as those that Chamberlain (and to an even greater extent Evans, as we shall see) employs—both in her morphisms and the more integrally intertwined

metaphors of the veined rock—at times seem to move beyond the figurative towards an apprehension of the agencies and confederacies of the more-than-human world, and might be regarded as 'more-than-metaphorical'.

It is not only through morphisms and metaphor that Chamberlain explores the blurred edges between human and animal. She identifies the seals as a dominant force in the island's identity, and in its ability to enchant the observer. The first section of the book is entitled 'The Cave of Seals' (1996: 15), and she notes in her journal, 'Island bird life is rich; but for me, the seals give it a most special magic' (NLW MS30 21511 B, f43r). There are several passages in which Chamberlain evokes the idea of the silkie: the human/seal or the seal/human. Her encounters with seals in the Seal Cave on the eastern side of the island bring a sense of close identification and communication. A seal cow seems to be calling to her, causing Chamberlain to exclaim: 'So great was the human mermaid attraction that I could have leapt to my death by drowning. A woman on land and a silkie in the sea (1996: 31). In a subsequent passage she dreams that she is a woman who has married a silkie male and ponders on the erotic charge of this union, concluding 'There is often so strong a link between woman and seal that it would seem almost normal for them to co-habit' (38). While this statement may appear uncomfortably transgressive, it undoubtedly questions the strict human/animal demarcations of our culture, and establishes a sense of nonhuman 'subjectivities' in the landscape

In tandem with this keen attentiveness to the more-than-human world of the island, there is, as we have already seen, evidence that Chamberlain is fully versed in the island's multiple cultural histories. It can be argued that at times she is actively resisting the clichés and tropes of islandness in general, as well as some of the more specific cultural associations of Bardsey in particular, in order to report the realities of island life more accurately. She writes:

> People dream up a lot of romantic moonshine about islands, talking of complete freedom; actually it is a life of strict behaviour, self-discipline, self-reliance, and duty to one's neighbours. (NLW MS 20 21501E, f66r)

Chamberlain is herself, of course, possessed of an initially romantic attitude to the island, which finds fulfilment in her early days. A 1947 journal entry reads 'there is an untroubled calm these days as if an earthly paradise had been reached' (NLW MS 26 21507B, f35v), conjuring the trope of island as Eden, and at the beginning of *Tide-race* she expresses her excitement, describing her new life as 'this sort of adventurous Robinson Crusoe-type of existence' (16). However, as the passage above suggests, she assesses other people's

romantic expectations more critically. She satirises a fellow visitor to the island, mocking his attraction to the fantasies of island life: 'He had expected some fairy quality in the island, a dreamlike perfection, a mode of existence lifted above life. He had wanted to sink himself in the past; to walk a Celtic shore, led on by long-footed maidens with anaemic faces' (44). The invocation of these anaemic, Celtic maidens with strangely elongated feet seems to be a sardonic reference to the maidens in white samite of the Arthurian legends who rowed Arthur to his final resting place or who attend Merlin in his crystal castle. It might also be read as a critique of the desire to see the island as a repository of Celtic identity (as the Irish Aran islands were in the early 20th century), rather than as its own place.

Similarly she feels that the cultural associations of islandness (here, perhaps, alluding to Stevenson's *Treasure Island*) may skew others' apprehension of the island, especially that of children, who are then likely to be shocked by the island's material realities:

> This is a world for the enchanted young, who learn at an early age that this rock-fragment which on a map is a drawing of a treasure island taking on an unreal fantasy in certain moods of summer weather, is set in an element too big for contemplation. The impact with reality is enough to unnerve a child. (1996: 95)

The notion of a reality set in an element too big for contemplation resonates with Robinson's cosmic setting for Árainn and his sense of the way in which the island pushes against its apparent limits. It also evidences, as does Robinson's work, a sense of cartography as perpetuating misleading tropes. It suggests that, for Chamberlain, island life exceeds its cultural framings in ways that should be acknowledged.

Chorographies I

At the same time, however, there is evidence throughout even the passages that seem most focused on the 'realities' of island life that the picture is coloured by Chamberlain's own tendency to fictionalise and mythologise experience, in a manner that begins to pull against a sense of phenomenological immersion. Walford Davies quite rightly suggests that Chamberlain's mapping of this island space, and spaces to which it is archipelagically connected, is coloured and inflected by 'those aspects of her gender, sexual, cultural and imaginative identity that were permanently under pressure' (2012: 79), and there is throughout the work a persistent sense of slippage between the real and the imagined. Looking back to the island on a visit to St Mary's well on the mainland, for example, she

exclaims: ‘But the island, the island, was the legendary rock, the magnet of our blood. For an instant forgetting the reality in dream I saw it as an unattainable, nameless vision’ (1996: 68). At times it is the ‘legendary rock’ that comes to dominate the picture of the island that emerges—just as it is the Lesser Aran that sometimes shadows Robinson’s Árainn—a vision refracted through the lens of mythology and personal registers of meaning. It hints at a response to the island in which the choreographic and the chorographic begin to pull against each other in the emergence of a more ambivalent subjective response.

In fact, there is always a sense, as Walford Davies argues, that Chamberlain’s articulation of Bardsey’s islandness, though attentive to its vibrant choreographies, is heavily influenced by her own, personal preoccupations. Chamberlain’s fascination with rock formations, while clearly associated with their metamorphic material genesis, also hints at an interest in the metamorphoses of classical mythology and her own interpretation of these. An image that haunts her whole oeuvre is that of death by drowning. In *Tide-race* she writes, ‘The sea is full of faces, and it is a sea of faces, the incredulous fixed faces of the doomed. This is the death by drowning’ (1996: 62). This evocation of the island’s dead is echoed by R. S. Thomas’s description, cited above, of Bardsey’s ‘gallery of the frightened faces of the long-drowned’ in the poem ‘Pilgrimages’ (1998: 364). But for Chamberlain it seems to have additional layers of significance that move beyond the island itself. Jill Piercy comments on the way in which for Chamberlain the drowned are associated with rocks. In terms of Chamberlain’s paintings she notes, ‘She became intrigued by the way a drowned torso could be transformed, imaginatively, into rock’ (Piercy 2013: 259). Thus, the ‘metamorphosed flesh’ of our ancestors may be fraught with a darker significance than that of shared material choreographies, and may represent less the material rocks of Bardsey than some mythic universal ‘rock’. This is an argument that might also be applied to her evocation of the silkie myth, which could be seen as a reflection on her troubled perceptions of her own gender and sexual identity as much as a proto-posthumanist articulation of hybridity.

Likewise, the passages of descriptive nature writing in *Tide-race*, which are often foreshadowed in the journals, seem always to move beyond the material and the mimetic into the realm of the mythical, and to be coloured by a powerfully subjective response. In an undated journal entry from a notebook thought to have been in use in 1950-1951 and headed ‘The Island’, she writes;

> Blue and gold day. A breeze from the north east. Cormorants, gulls, herring, common, lesser & greater black backs, guillemots, razor bills, puffins, oystercatchers. A world of birds, wings, cries and stench from the nesting ledges. The gull king. Cold amber eyes, and arrogant beak dripping with sea water. Gull chicks lying everywhere; speckled ugly creatures squatting on the dry ground. Eggs, slowly being chipped open as the young bird felt the insistence of the breeding sun. The bald surface of the island. Except for one large extent of henbane, purple-veined creamy flowers with dark poisonous hearts. (NLW ex 2436: f97v)

She supplements this entry with a passage copied directly (but with some omissions) from Culpeper's Herbal that features a description of the plant Henbane, including details of its 'deadish yellow' colour, the look of its 'dusty greyish' seeds, and its 'offensive' scent, and which ends with the association of this plant with the planet Saturn: 'ergo it is an herb of Saturn' (NLW ex 2436: f97v, underlining in original).

It is interesting to compare this diary entry with the corresponding passage in *Tide-race* which is clearly based on it, but in which we see an ever greater tendency to dramatise and invoke the mythical, as well as what appears to be an increasing unease in the face of the material choreographies being enacted at the writer's feet. The list of bird species—an aspect of the physical island—is now missing. The area is 'rank' with Henbane, which is 'soulless'; 'seed' has been changed to 'semen' and Culpeper's 'dusty greyish colour' to 'the colour of house dust'; and the human observers are now full of 'a sort of fear' (1996: 33). Taking Culpeper's mention of Saturn,[10] she introduces us to the idea of an association between the island and melancholy. She writes: 'This herb under Saturn draws melancholy humours from the region of the heart' (33). Walford Davies talks of Chamberlain as a 'smart psychogeographer', always 'aware of the ways in which physical space conditions our inner, creative lives' (2013: xiii). Here, perhaps we see an even more complex naturalcultural interplay, in which physical space conditions inner space but is itself conditioned by the preoccupations of that inner space. Ultimately the passage works against a sense of material immersion, hinting instead at the island's potential to evoke fear, revulsion and emotional distress in a human subject perhaps already pre-disposed by existing cultural framings and by her own preoccupations towards those emotions.

This might be seen as evidence of the way in which Chamberlain's personal chorography colours, or even distorts, the picture of Bardsey's choreographies that emerges in her writing—a perception that perhaps lends weight to the concern in island

[10] A reference to the medical herbalism of the 17th century which linked the four humours of the body with an extended cosmology.

studies that literary evocations of islandness potentially constitute an 'appropriation of island realness' (Hay 2006: 19). However, it might be argued that at certain points it is the island's darker phenomenologies themselves that help to generate this conflicted account. Though Chamberlain initially and optimistically hails Bardsey as the home of her heart and looks to it for emotional and physical healing, she quickly finds the obverse of her fantasy: 'Terror. Violence. Greed. I was not passing over to a dream life, an escapist's paradise, but to one that whitened the hair and bowed the back, that would raise sea-monsters of hatred and despair' (1996: 56). It is perhaps in part the gulf between her expectations of the place, fed by the tropes of island as paradise and sanctuary, and the disappointments of its daily realities, that leads to such a harsh reversal. Nevertheless there is a very real sense in which the island realities themselves quite legitimately evoke feelings of revulsion and unease in her, raising some important questions about the possibility of deep ecological immersion.

There are points in the book, for example, where one might feel that Abram's sense of the world as a potentially benign 'tissue of experience' (2010: 143) is rendered untenable by that harrowing vulnerability he also acknowledges, and the way in which the human animal (as much a part of the material world as anything else) reveals depths of cruelty and/or depravity. In a passage in which a young boy loses some of his sense of the island's enchantment, Chamberlain describes a conger eel, caught in the morning and hung up to dry outside the boathouse 'after its throat and belly had been ripped open' (1996: 96). The boy passes the eel in the afternoon and runs his finger along it only to find its tail striking him in the face. At this,

> He ran screaming towards the men, away from the grinning conger eel. He stopped at the edge of the shingle and looked into the mysterious water which, it seemed to him, had suddenly become inhabited by serpents.
>
> The child was told by his father that the eel would live though disembowelled and impaled, until sunset. (96)

Albeit brought about by an act of callous human disregard for animal sentience, this event suggests that the processes of death in nature are not always easily synthesised into a harmonious sense of immersion. The same is true of the processes of human illness: in January 1959 Chamberlain was witness to a terrifying incident when a modern day 'solitary'—Berthold Panek—apparently brought to the island by its association with spirituality, suffered a schizophrenic breakdown and had to be forcibly removed. She recounts the story in *Tide-race,* calling Panek 'Wolfgang', and commenting: 'I shall never

forget the madness of his eyes; or the terrible animal sounds that burst from him, sounds that made him seem both bull and tiger' (1996: 209). In her journal she records a letter she writes to Father Crowley in January 1959 in which she articulates the lasting impact of this trauma:

> For the first time particularly on this island, we are terrified in our souls of some fearful darkness that has been loosed abroad. I know I speak for every one of us when I say that though Berthold has gone his devils are still here to us. (NLW MS 31 21512 B: f16r)

Chamberlain's troubled relationship with some of the islanders perhaps also contributes to her unease. During her early days on the island she was caught up in the exploits of Cadwaladr[11]—a disturbingly potent and Machiavellian force in *Tide-race*—who seemed to exert a cruelly vindictive power over both the island population and his own immediate family. Her relationship with other islanders was also tense, as her account of her stay on the island in *Tide-race* itself suggests.[12] As we saw in the Introduction, Godfrey Baldacchino argues that outsiders who come into island life can offer 'valid and insightful commentaries on island life' (2008: 43), but he also notes that small islands may be restrictive and that 'should one deviate from expected and established practices, the threat of ostracism is immense' (2011: 103). Chamberlain's work, which does not seem to hold back from critical comment, certainly did not endear her to the islanders. According to Kate Holman, they felt hurt and betrayed by her barely concealed accounts of them in *Tide-race,* such that the final termination of her tenancy at Carreg was at the request of the owner, Lord Newborough (1997: 8).

Chamberlain also begins to feel the unavoidable and very real restrictions of island life. In a passage from a journal thought to be in use in 1950-51, but in a pencil-written entry which may have been added later, she comments, 'I came back to my prison on the searock' (NLW MS27 21508B, f20r). While the idea of the island as prison is, of course, one of the tropes of islandness, Bardsey's tide race and difficulty of access mean that the island can be cut off for weeks at a time, with the sea and the seasons dictating the tenor of life on the island. Again, in a journal passage Chamberlain writes:

> We are filled as if it were for the first time with the coming horror of winter's darkest days […] It is necessary to strain patience and fortitude to the utmost, and say 'Well, even the worst weather ends

[11] Identified by Walford Davies as real-life islander Thomas 'Twm' Griffiths (2012: 83).

[12] Her early time on the island was marred (according to Chamberlain) by the jealousy of one of the islander's wives over the mutual enthusiasm for island life Chamberlain shared with the woman's husband. Chamberlain discovered that it was considered generally suspect for a woman to live alone on the island, and her arrival was not greeted with enthusiasm: 'That woman's here again, all by herself in the next house' (1996: 56).

> sometime' at the same moment remembering uneasily the gale that went on without moderation for five whole weeks some years ago. (NLW MS 20 21501E, f62r)

These observations, which conjure the darker phenomenologies of island life, reveal another side to Bardsey's identity. While it might offer the kind of sanctity and integrity apprehended by Elgar and (initially) by Chamberlain, and might appear to be an ideal setting in which to experience an immersive and redemptive being-in-the-world, it is, also, potentially, a place of intensified human suffering and incarceration.

The sense of fear and revulsion we encounter in certain passages in *Tide-race* is particularly acute when it comes to the processes of material decay. Chamberlain describes a rusting anchor chain among the rocks as 'salt-bitten, repulsive as an unearthed corpse' (1996: 60). It evokes in her a feeling of revulsion from which she extrapolates a wider world view. The passage continues,

> There is fog at the edge of the tide, sad and cold, ancient and out of time. The boat will not come back tonight. The swell breaks over the half-submerged rocks at the entrance, and the women who have waited and the women who will wait for men to come over the waves, are round me in the darkness of the boat-house. (60)

This world of shades is one which, rather than making a confederation with the material world through an all-embracing concurrent time, distances Chamberlain from flesh and blood:

> The sea eats and rusts their hearts away as it rots the links of the chain. At twilight I am far from warm-blooded contacts; chilled by an inhuman world of shade. There are gulfs of fog between me and other mortals. (60)

As with the material decay of the anchor chain, there is something corrosive and corruptive in the female condition, or at least the condition of the female islander. The description develops into a meditation on a symbolic woman, investing the passage, as Walford Davies observes of Chamberlain's whole oeuvre, with a generalised sense of 'female tragedy' (2012: 13). There is a hint here that it is the unavoidable contact with death and decay on the island that most forcibly disrupts Chamberlain's relationship with its vibrant materiality, and reveals most acutely the way in which her personal chorography—influenced perhaps by what Holman calls Chamberlain's 'preoccupation with death' (1997: 92)—comes to dominate her representation of Bardsey.

Twenty thousand saints I

The picture of the island that is emerging thus far is one characterised by ambivalence and contradiction—a chorography that responds to both the island's vibrancy and its darker phenomenologies while at the same time mythologising them in ways that distance them

from their initial context. Chamberlain's attitude to the dead saints is similarly ambivalent, as is neatly demonstrated by the juxtaposition of the following two observations early in *Tide-race:* 'The bones of the faithful make for a fertile earth. The past is too much with us' (1996: 20). The first sentence of the couplet conjures the benign effects of the material choreography of decomposition, and seems to denote an acceptance of the ubiquity on the island of the remains of the dead. In an echo of Dinorben Griffith's description, she explains:

> In every part of the island which is free of stone, the spade strikes against human thigh and breast-bone. In an island of only four hundred and forty-four acres, with half of that mountain and with reputedly twenty-thousand saints buried there, it is understandable that certain areas of the earth should be thick with bones. (26)

Indeed, initially, the dead seem to relay a message of fulfilment to their cheerful descendants: 'Under the eastern height men turn the remains of their ancestors when they dig; forking them over happily under the wide sky-benediction; for these are the bones of men who fulfilled themselves' (26). But at the same time these evidences of the past are 'too much with' Chamberlain. She shows her susceptibility to the necrocratic power of these ancestors, drawn into the cultural moulds they have left for her to fill, and consumed by a desire for transcendental meaning. Describing the island as 'this cold hill descending into the sea' (18), she argues:

> So old are her enchantments, so subtle, that we who cling to the vestiges of the legendary past, sink unknowingly into the moulds of our race, becoming upon her shores Mankind in search of a sign from heaven. (18)

This quest for a sign from heaven seems unlikely to be answered, since death and the processes of decay dissipate human meaning. She plaintively asks, 'Who can distinguish between the dust of the saint and the lecher?' (18).[13]

There is no doubt that the dead saints have a significant influence over Chamberlain's construction of the island, increasingly infiltrating her thinking. Reading the inscription on the stone crosses in the churchyard, she exclaims:

> O stone, stone dweller in this western burial ground, how you pierce us with words. Who were you before you were worm, and through worm, dust, that you have power to move us with words carved on your gravestone? […] but the cry from your stone lips is in our understanding. […]. I have spent long hours looking into my heart.' (1996: 78)

Though rendered into anonymous dust by the worm (rather than, as in Abram's vision, being dispersed ecstatically into the flesh of the world), the dead are still able to raise their

[13] A sentiment that, again, finds an echo in R.S. Thomas' 'Pilgrimages' when he writes of 'the slow chemistry of the soil/ that turns saints' bones to dust,/ dust to an irritant of the nostril' (1998: 364).

voices, conjuring in Chamberlain the very sense of guilt and responsibility Harrison writes about. The home of her heart has become the site of painful heart-searching. More than this, the evidences of mortality become a symbol for a sorrow that encompasses both the individual and the whole of 'humanity'. She goes on (quoting in part from one of the stone crosses in Bardsey's churchyard), evoking a polyphony of voices and languages:

> An sit dolor par dolori meo [If there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow]. The world is in ashes of sorrow. Each one of us is forced to bear the cross. Sicherlich, du hast deins auch. [Surely you have your own]. Nihil ad vos? O viatores onmes. Intuemini et videte an sit dolor par dolori meo, qui factus est mihi. [Is it nothing to you? All ye that pass by. Behold and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me]. (78, translation of Latin based on Lamentations 1:12; translation of German my own)

Here, with her blending of biblical Latin, English and German, she conjures a polyphonic lament for our mortal state. For Chamberlain, it seems increasingly that the intensification of the awareness of death Bardsey seems to evoke—the way in which all who pass through become witness to the sorrow of the saints—cancels out the possibility of a purely embodied, enworlded relation to the island, and brings an inescapable feeling of finality and loss.

At times Chamberlain tries to resist the intimations that these material evidences of mortality bring, sometimes managing to seize the present even in the midst of thoughts preoccupied with the processes of death and decay, in moments of existential awareness. Meditating on a graveyard scene she writes:

> The headstone with a willow on it, the burrowing worm so vital, taking my life away, transforming the corpse into another organism, both will fall into decay. Who cares, who should care when a winged thistle seed drifts over the sea? There is happiness to seize, loneliness to bear. (90)

Though the headstone, the willow and the 'vital' worm will all be subject to decay, the sense of loss this implies is counterbalanced by the hopeful image of the floating seed, which carries the promise of new growth, and by the sense of the richness of a life to be lived, animated by compelling affective states. For Chamberlain herself, the horror of death and the loss it represents seem to revolve around a desire to remain consciously enworlded in the face of the knowledge that consciousness will (probably) end with death. She writes:

> Could I be sure of remaining conscious with power to enjoy the sight of the earth, though I should be an unidentifiable spark, how much less agony my days would hold, but without agony, wild exaltation would also vanish. If I had a thousand years in which to learn the secrets of the sea, the force of my desire would become lost in the thought of eternity. Though tomorrow may be nothing to me: I nothing to tomorrow, today is mine. (70)

It is a passage in which Chamberlain appears to accept the agony of the expectation of death, since with it comes the wild exaltation of knowing oneself to be alive, and to embrace the temporal limitation of our lives since it is this that generates the force of desire which animates life itself. This perspective is reminiscent to some extent of Robinson's paradoxical relationship with the quest for the good step, and his feeling that Árainn is worthy of his impassioned attentiveness almost because of its promise that it can never be fully known by a mortal human. However, for Chamberlain, the irony here is that the very consciousness of being enworlded immediately unenworlds us with its corollary—the awareness that consciousness will cease with our death. As with other contradictory elements of her response to the island, her brief philosophical accommodation of the idea of mortality is undermined by the passage that ends the chapter:

> Outside the chapel, the cracked bell hung motionless. The night-spirits of the island moved in from the ocean: shearwater after shearwater cackled and laughed until the air was evil, until there was left no memory of the day's festivity. (71)

Shearwaters are known for having a cry capable of conjuring images of the Devil (see Dawkins 2007: 87), and here, far from signifying kinship and confederacy they represent torment and evil, and, like the processes of material decay on the island, symbolise the destruction of human memory and meaning.

When Chamberlain has her own encounter with human bones, her sense of revulsion and guilt at disturbing the saints and contravening the instruction of the stone cross, leaves her traumatised: 'Feverishly, we washed and washed our hands, to deny having touched the bones' (1996: 181). This episode in the book is followed by a curious and unexplained anecdote which sees Chamberlain apparently experiencing the island as a 'thin place', much as Elgar did, in a vision of concurrent time in which the saints once again take on corporeal form. She has already noted that 'This is a land that hoards its past and merges all of time in its present' (28), and here she recounts, 'On the Sunday of August the thirtieth' she writes,

> I had seen the living abbey; its shape and extent, its hive-activity; the smoke of its kitchens, the keen industry of its fertile gardens; its physical labour, prayer and contemplation; monks reading the Office for the day, or sitting relaxed at open windows, with their sandalled feet thrust out into the sunlight. (181)

The experience of the tissue thin barriers of island time does not connote a happy sense of immersion in the island world for long, however, as it becomes apparent that, for Chamberlain, the saints are not resting in peace at all, but, trapped in a state of cosmic

limbo: ‘They fill the house with their singing, but they are more than voicers of canticles, for in their disembodied state is lostness and yearning as if they felt too keenly the cold austerity of outer regions of space’ (222). So powerful is this disembodied yearning that it seems to interrupt the material processes of nature which make organic use of the corpses, so that the dead saints wait menacingly in the earth without decomposing: ‘We live on top of a graveyard of long-boned men. Deserted even by the worms, they bide their time in the earth, ochre-stained from their sojourn there, grinning like the dogfish in the Sound’ (222).

Nevertheless, towards the close of *Tide-race* Chamberlain reaffirms her sense of the island as the ‘alighting place of her heart’ (1996: 220), a place in which she seems able to overcome the subject/object divide: ‘The life which at first seemed so confining, so stifling, has become the releasing spring, until at last, there is no question of identity’ (220). Yet almost immediately, describing the abbey walls, she exclaims, ‘the ruin gives, like everything else on this deluding scrap of rock and turf, provocative hints of the past’ (220-1). Enworldedness is thus always compromised by the interplay of delusion—for which, perhaps, one can read ‘tropes of islandness’—and materiality, and both are interrupted by voices from the past and the imminence and immanence of death.

Tide-race ends:

> we are all in the danse macabre, the fatal play of life and death.
>
> The stained bones underground feel our dancing measure. The brisk feet leap over our own future grave-plots.
>
> A little larger than life, dancing with more abandon and grotesqueness than the others, with the devil nudging his elbow and manipulating a wire in his head, is Caliban the beast; the native genius of Prospero’s island; of mine; of any island.
>
> On this small stage, this microcosm, in the middle of a scene, the shadow of death falls upon the players. (1996: 222)

Here the islanders dance over earth which holds the ancient, stained bones of the saints and will at some future point hold the bones of the dancers themselves. It is a vision of concurrent time which includes the dead and, if not the not-yet-born, then at least the not-yet-dead, but one in which the considerations of taking the future of humanity into our care that Harrison notes are obscured by the shadow of mortality. The appearance of Caliban[14] reminds us inexorably of the complexity of, and competing claims upon, any island fantasy. He might even be seen here as symbolic of the tension between island dreams and island reality, a tension rendered all the more powerful on Bardsey by the collision of the experience of its immensely rich ecology with its cultural association with death. Overall,

[14] According to Walford Davies, a reference to the manipulative islander Cadwaldr (2012: 113).

Chamberlain's hybrid form has provided us with ambiguous choreographies and disjointed chorographies that bear witness to a human consciousness struggling to achieve that dissolution of the self and sense of vital enworldedness so desirable from a deep ecological perspective, but finding itself unenworlded by its subjective responses and above all by its knowing participation in the 'fatal play of life and death'.

Christine Evans' *Island of Dark Horses:* setting the scene

If it is the shadow of death that falls over Brenda Chamberlain's players, it is the promise of birth or rebirth that animates the island landscape of Christine Evans'1995 poetry collection, *Island of Dark Horses*. Like Chamberlain, she expresses an immediate and profoundly personal connection with the island, and in a notion that immediately establishes Bardsey as an agentic force, she states that it was, in fact, the island that chose her, rather than the other way round: 'It is the great fact of my life, the place that chose me and where I became the person I am, or the better part of it' (2008: 42).

As with Chamberlain's opening paragraph, Evans' opening poem, 'Songline', sets the island scene in richly allusive fashion, and shows her immediately invoking both general tropes of islandness and Bardsey's specific natureculture, while at the same time establishing her own personal relationship with the place. The poem begins,

> Under my own apple tree
> in a warm, walled garden
> on an island
> at the extremity of a green peninsula
> in an amniotic sea
>
> I sit and read
> of nomads (1995: 7)

The garden with its apple tree invokes the trope of the island as Eden, (or perhaps Avalon, the 'Isle of Apples'), and does indeed seem to represent for Evans a kind of paradisaical home. However, the phrase 'my own apple tree' suggests the impossibility of a transgressive Fall for this Eve, since she claims the garden as her own place. It is a testament to the way in which she, like Robinson, is intent upon developing her own island creation story. Certainly the idea of the 'amniotic sea' conjures an image of new creation and new birth, which paves the way for the profoundly vibrant and agentic island which emerges in the collection as a whole. In a further development of Evans' creation myth, the closing lines of the poem 'I wake / to light-filled island air/ and it is so' (7) echo the

repetitions of 'and it was so' in the book of Genesis (1:1-15). For Evans, though, it is a secular creation, enacted through the vibrancy of the island world and bodied forth culturally by the poet's singing of the island space.[15] The poem as a whole suggests that Evans, like Chamberlain, might have found the home of her heart.

Choreographies II

The sense of creativity and of 'coming into being' already identified in 'Songline' is amplified in 'Enlli', where people arrive on the island with 'birth-wet' faces (8). Together these images not only emphasise notions of generativity but also give a sense of the island as a gendered space, a feminised landscape. This idea emerges again in the poem 'Sounding', where Evans compares waiting for the sound of the fog horn to the experience of giving birth:

> Timing it makes the moment
> Momentous, makes me recall
> Contractions. And, after each
> A glistening bag of quiet sounds
> Opens, drying off around us. (28-9)

However, rather than interpret this association with gestation as being indicative either of the link with the self-aggrandising ego noted by Gillian Beer (1990: 271) or of an essentialising identification of woman and 'nature', which might suggest that the poet's relationship with the island is enhanced by her gender as such, I would argue that it is first and foremost evidence of the embodied and enworlded nature of Evans' response to the place. Evans herself has explained to Alice Entwistle, in a comment that supports this interpretation, her feelings about the significance of gender. She says, 'Gender is important to me because I have a woman's body and the body is where we live' (Evans cited in Entwistle 2013: 85), but qualifies this statement: 'but I don't accept that imagination is subject to limitations of gender. It can grope towards other species or states of being' (85).

This notion of reaching out imaginatively to other species and states of being is one central to material ecocriticism, and one that Evans enacts throughout *Island of Dark Horses* in her representation of the myriad voices and agencies of the island. Echoing the line from Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race* quoted earlier, Evans also feels that it is Bardsey itself that moves to meet the new arrivals; 'The island swings towards us, slowly' (8). Later in the collection, this sense of movement (and welcome) is reversed, as a

[15] The title of the poem is a reference to Bruce Chatwin's book *The Songlines* which Evans was reading at the time of writing this poem (an interpretation confirmed by Evans herself in conversation).

boatload of people leave the island. Some look back, 'but the island/ has already turned away, become horizon' (70), suggesting that the island makes the choice to engage with (and disengage from) visitors. In 'Window, Dynogoch,' the poet, this time in an echo of Chamberlain's 'snapping rocks', sees at summer's lowest tide,

> rocks, dark-slimy-haired, uncouth,
> hump and crawl themselves
> back out of the warm shallows onto land (11)

The part zoomorphising/part anthropomorphising of the uncouth crawling rocks has a somewhat (deliberately) comic effect. Nevertheless, these geological features evidence a self-directedness and vitality that might, once again, usefully be thought of as more-than-metaphorical.

As with Chamberlain, the agency of the sea is also never forgotten, in the way it determines the lives of the fishermen and dictates the possibility (or not) of arrival at, or departure from, the island. For Evans, an awareness of the sea's moods is combined with a general sense of the way in which the more-than-human world is replete with messages. In her non-fiction prose work *Bardsey,* in a section entitled '*Learning the Island*' (2008: 27, italics in original), Evans describes the development of a receptivity to what might be seen as the biosemiotic resonances of her island home—resonances that the island itself seems to intensify:

> I began to appreciate how an island is the best place to recognise subtle changes in the weather. On all but the calmest days, the slightest air movements can be felt and the sound of the sea, breathing all around you is a living presence. (2008: 27)

This sense of the sea as a living, breathing presence extends, for Evans, to the island as a whole. She explains: 'When you arrive it feels as though [the island] wraps itself around you, and then as you walk up you get the sense of everything—it's like a whole breathing, living, regenerating world that's constantly remaking itself' (Evans 2013: n.p.).

The poem 'Gannets' further demonstrates the diverse ways in which communication and signification are bodied forth and might be read by a human observer:

> Far out on the west, their whiteness
> Signals the early simple message
> *Sun*, before any warmth
> Spills over the hunched shoulder
> We were glad to lie against all night. (12)

The visual effect of the reflection of early morning sunlight on the birds' white plumage signals the rising of the sun before it makes itself felt in other ways. They birds themselves

are also intensely animate and purposeful, their actions suggesting that their agency is associated with the kind of intentionality more usually attributed to the human subject. In the middle of the poem there is a short italicised stanza: '*How high? A hundred feet or more…/ Depends how deep the shoal is feeding'* (12). In the collection as a whole, italics are often used to denote speech or inner thought processes. Here it is unclear whose contemplation this is, but it can be interpreted as the gannets' own reading of the text of the sea, measuring their ascent against the corresponding depth of the fish. The sense of awe their subsequent plunge into the sea inspires in the poet is itself experienced as an embodied, phenomenological response: 'Watching makes us hold our breath' (13).

The complex signification, animation and multisensory effects in evidence here are even more apparent in the poem 'Storm':

> And yes, the sky was feathered
> for the coming wind, the bay at Solfach full
> of smashed kelp, warm and gastric-smelling;
> murk building on the horizon
> and sea's smooth skin crawling
> remembering storms, sweating messages
> in beery scum to warn the shore.
> Soon the waves will let go, run,
> risk all together
> while land dwellers grip, rooted, desperate. (67)

This densely more-than-metaphorical passage represents a complicated entanglement of human and more-than-human attributes, all of which attest to the approach of a severe weather event. The description is not only kinaesthetic in its nature, but also a form of synaesthesia, in the way that the sensory perceptions are jumbled together, mixing and blurring the objects being described, with a host of 'morphisms' coming into play. Thus the cloudy sky is feathered like a bird, the seaweed smells like the contents of a creature's stomach, the water has a membrane that crawls and sweats like a human's skin. The sea is presented as possessing a memory—'remembering storms' and warning the shore of coming storm—an image which in this context reads as a more-than-metaphorical expression of the kind of 'intelligence' that Abram sees as immanent throughout the more-than-human world. The passage as a whole resonates with Bennett's formulation of human and more-than-human phenomena as confederations of beings rather than ontologically distinct entities.

It is clear, then, that Evans finds no difficulty in apprehending the agency and vibrancy of the island world. However, this is not to suggest that she is oblivious to the tropes of islandness and to Bardsey's specific pre-existing cultural associations. Like Chamberlain, at times Evans brings those tropes into play in order to interrogate them and express a sense of resistance to them. She describes *Island of Dark Horses* as 'a collection of poems exclusively about the island, its history and my experience of it' (2008: 135), and stresses the fact that she tried 'not to be seduced by myth' (2008: 135) in her approach. Expressing sentiments that establish her devotion to the actualities of island life, she explains:

> I did not want to write about Bardsey in a misty, Celtic twilight sort of way; for me, it was a place to live (to *make a living,* that lovely phrase implying hard-won satisfactions): practical, pragmatic. (134)

She argues that the Arthurian associations of the island 'make a soft-focus fuzz through which physical realities keep breaking' (134). This observation emphasises, once again, the idea that the island exceeds its myths and tropes. While acknowledging that 'Bardsey is a fertile ground for legend' (139), she qualifies this with the subsequent statement, 'but it is too real for Camelot, too anchored in rock and full of squelch and slither and the stench of rotting seaweed' (139). Furthermore these material processes of corruption and decay are evoked appreciatively rather than with the revulsion that shows through Chamberlain's writing about similar phenomena.

Correspondingly, then, Evans' poetry interrogates the ways in which the island is 'pre-troped' (Longley 2010: 144). In 'Meeting the Boat', she satirises, though with some compassion, the island fantasies of the new arrivals, and their sense of the trip as a 'voyage of discovery':

> Some arrive well-wrapped
> in the bubble of expectations
> we might see punctured by a sharpening edge
> of sense, if they stay long enough (9)

Tellingly, though, what might render their experience more 'real' is the 'sharpening edge of sense'. 'Sense' is a significant word here, and one which recurs elsewhere in the collection. In this poem, as in its other occurrences, it carries the full weight of both its meanings: sense, as in good sense, wisdom, reasoning; and sense, as in feeling, perception, consciousness. For Evans, it can be argued, there is no distinction between the two applications. Instead she articulates an expansive phenomenology in which wisdom and

perception intertwine. In this sensuous-good-sense, island fantasies that stray too far from the practical and the pragmatic are roundly dismissed.

Chorographies II

There are points, though, where Evans seems more willing to explore the tropes, to adapt them to her own purposes, and even, on occasion, to perpetuate them, revealing how deeply the island's cultural constructions infiltrate her thinking. The poem 'Douglas' describes an elderly islander who 'talks of dying/ As someone else would plan a journey' (1995: 64). Perhaps the introduction of the theme of death here conjures the historical associations of the island, as the fifth stanza reveals the poet walking with Douglas along a shore

> Where great slabs, like the front of churches
> Split, were thrown down,
> Rubble that seemed still cooling
> Round a block like a vast stone coffin
> Wet-dark, inscribed by weather. (64)

It is a complex passage in which the shoreline is suffused with images which intertwine the material with the cultural. The rocks, though interpreted in a different fashion from Chamberlain's veined memorials, nevertheless seem to embody a range of meanings.[16] The mention of 'churches' and a 'vast stone coffin' invokes the island's connection with religion and burial, while the 'rubble that seemed still cooling' perhaps references deep geological time—igneous rocks cooling and becoming metamorphic as they enfold blocks of other stone. In further allusive spirit, Evans sees Douglas as 'like Prospero' (64) and then later in the poem, implicitly, as King Arthur, being carried to his last resting place in a 'black boat' attended by 'three women' (64).

The question is whether, as with Chamberlain's sinking into the cultural moulds of our race, we begin to lose sight of the 'real' island. In fact, like Chamberlain, Evans also touches, briefly, on her own susceptibility to the charms of the mythic. In the poem 'At the End of Summer' she describes a walk with a companion, confessing: 'It was easy, looking over towards Ireland/ To understand the myth of Avalon' (1995: 62). Hearing Malcolm Muggeridge on the radio, 'at eighty/ Welcoming the thought of death', she looks out over the sea:

[16] The compound adjective 'wet-dark', for example, carries a hint of Chamberlain's 'wine dark' rocks, showing Evans to be similarly aware of the Homeric tradition.

The long arm of the mainland down to Aber
        Was shadow-pleated and against the hills
Small gibberish of stars was signalling
        I could blot it all out with one finger
While we seemed effortlessly floating outward
        Towards the shining, that mesmeric edge. (62)

In this stanza, as she looks south-eastwards towards Aberystwyth, the poet finds herself unable or unwilling to read the biosemiotics of the sky: the stars' language is 'gibberish' and their signals can be wilfully obliterated with one finger. With this connection to the material world obscured, it is only too easy to give in to the attractions of the shining, mesmeric western edge, which carries with it hints of the transcendental. Given that the poem is in part generated by Muggeridge's discussion of death, the mesmeric edge evokes ideas of a frontier between life and death—or, rather, between death and the afterlife. This is a concept that Evans specifically disavows elsewhere, though she can understand its appeal. In the interview she firmly states: 'I can see the attraction of the idea—but I don't actually believe' (2013: n.p.). However, there is no doubt that at times Evans is drawn into that dream of a western mesmeric edge. In his commentary on this poem Matthew Jarvis argues: 'even if she only started off by *thinking* of dreams and legends as she looked west, Evans is now figuring the west explicitly in terms of mystery' (2008: 109).

Both Jarvis and Entwistle, whose work represents the major part of the very limited amount of critical attention so far paid to Evans' work, give readings of her poetry that foreground meanings which go beyond the island world. Jarvis argues that Evans constructs the island as a 'sacred space […] within the geography of Wales', thus offering 'additional, conceptual reasons to value Bardsey' (2008: 123). For Entwistle, Evans' construction of Barsdey also impacts on questions of national identity, this time as a means of destabilising them and reframing them, and infusing them with a (female) gendered perspective which further enriches them. She highlights the way in which Evans' dual status as both incomer (from Yorkshire) and long-term inhabitant of Wales, both mainland dweller (in the winter months) and islander (in summer), predicates a fruitfully equivocal sense of national identity. These persuasive readings suggest that Evans' Bardsey reaches beyond its boundaries in ways that might be seen as distancing the poet from the island's materiality. However, what seems to distinguish Evans' island from that of Chamberlain, and to somewhat distance it from these critical interpretations, is her insistence, even in the midst of potentially broader constructions and symbolisms, on always orienting herself back to the physical island as the central focus of the work. She synthesises Bardsey's

complex natureculture in a way that allows the island to be always itself, always immersed in further choreographies of becoming.

This insistence is a feature of the collection as a whole and comes into play even when Evans is dealing with some of the darker aspects of island life. Her Bardsey is certainly not untouched by the kinds of suffering and deep emotional distress that darken Chamberlain's island: it is not some kind of pastoral idyll on which the vicissitudes of life as it is really lived never impinge. Several of the poems engage with the sorrows of islanders and visitors. In 'On Retreat' she writes about a woman whose careful and compassionate parenting has not been able to shield her children from unhappiness—a girl starving her body 'Because humanity, she screams, is rotten', and a boy who 'begins to ask why there's no cure for cruelty' (1995: 46), and in 'Meanwhile in Another Part of the Island', we find a woman who is weeping for the child she will never bear. The poem 'In the Hayfield' describes the experience of a seeker after the spirit who has come to the island because of its spiritual association, and whose faith, like Wolfgang's in *Tide-race*, is touched by delusion. In the poem a woman describes the appearance of stigmata on her hands—hands that, as the poem goes on, can be seen to be 'smooth, unscarred, quite clear' (50).

Neither is Evans afraid to portray the uglier side of 'natural' island life and the way in which humans and animals are involved in a complex and sometimes cruel interplay. In 'Pulpit Enlli' we are left in no doubt that there is a harsh and predatory more-than-human world in waiting, with carrion birds and insects that feed on decay: 'Crow and blowfly/ wait. In the windthrashed bracken,/ jagged edges, new-picked bones' (1995: 25). Similarly, the poem 'Myxomatosis' sees a young boy killing infected rabbits to save them from 'three days' long dying in the heat' (47). As the corpses pile up, the island air breathes 'a foulness' (47). Nevertheless, even in the midst of these perceptions, Evans' attention is always brought back to the immediate and animate island world—and to a sense that if we look carefully enough we might find our gaze matched by the intelligence of the more-than-human. In a poem in some ways reminiscent of Chamberlain's anecdote about the dying conger eel, Evans describes a man lifting a lumpfish (which he assumes to be dead or dying) from the sea and setting it on the hauler-box of his boat. As with the 'uncouth' rocks, Evans employs some comic anthropomorphism. The fish is seen as sporting 'black leather with its seven rows/ of studs, the candy-striped Mohican crest of/ fin and tail' (42). However, seeing a 'seriousness' in its aspect, the man bends closer and 'sees the fish/ swivel its eyes/ to look straight back at him […] returning his gaze as if it

knows what it's about/ fitting the man into its pattern of sense' (42). Our idea of individual human subjectivity is thus set eye to eye with the subjectivity and patterns of sense immanent in the more-than-human world.

This return of the word 'sense' highlights what lies at the heart of Evans' islandness. While she might explore cultural tropes, combine them into her personal chorographies, and even sometimes be tempted to sink, like Chamberlain, into the moulds of our race, what distinguishes her vision of Bardsey above all is the way in which she returns over and over to the sense data and specificities with which the island is brimming. She demonstrates the way in which the island both brings us 'to our senses', and gives us a valuable perspective on our human stature on the earth. In 'Terce' she observes that the island is 'a real place',

> small enough
> to see whole, big enough to lose
> our own importance. Brings us back
> to our senses. (1995: 80)

The idea of being brought to ones senses on the island perhaps finds its most powerful articulation in the poem 'Waves'. 'This is frontier country', she writes,

> to walk here is to feel
> perception quicken and the intellect
> for once sit humbly with its dials
> gone dark; to seem immense
> as cumulus,
> infinitesimal
> as sandgrain in the suck of each wave's gathering. (14-15)

The frontier in this poem, while it may resonate with the ideas of contested space and cultural and geographical borders identified by Walford Davies, Jarvis, and Entwistle, seems more to denote the barrier between self and world, which for Evans, as for Nicolson in Chapter 4, is 'tissue-thin' (Nicolson 2001: 13). Indeed Evans records the island's 20th century hermit, Sister Helen Mary's description of the island as a 'thin place, where barriers between [sic] dissolve' (2008: 159). For Evans, the island space induces just such a dissolution of barriers, an opening out of the observing subject and of the intellect into the dimensions of the more-than-human, from the massing clouds to the tiny grain of sand. Moreover, in a reversal of the Cartesian mind/body divide which constructs the body as a machine and the mind as a transcendent form, here the intellect is the machine with its dials gone dark allowing the kinetic phenomenology of walking to give rise to an

experience which, as one comes to rest, combines stasis with utter freedom. As the 'whole slow world spins' it offers 'completion/ unravelling/ control' (1995: 14). This might be seen as the perfect enactment of a deep ecological, ecophenomenological desire for immersion—a situation, made possible by the qualities of the island itself, in which the human self can experience a feeling of being utterly centred and simultaneously completely unravelled, ecstatically dispersed into the larger field of relations of which it forms a part.

Twenty thousand saints II

This sense of ecstatic dissolution into the environing space leads me on to a discussion of the way in which Evans negotiates the question of human mortality, and Bardsey's powerful association with death and burial. In contrast with Chamberlain's sense of corruption and loss, another central facet of Evans' poem 'Waves' is the idea that healing and redemption are implicit even in the processes of death and decay. The dissolution of the self is implicated in a liberating sense of the shore and sky being 'wiped clean, over and over' (1995: 14). The sea 'drowns heartbeat with its own' (14), not in Chamberlain's sense of drowning as a coercively enacted metamorphosis, but in a process that makes us new. This liberating sense that the island world is constantly recreating itself not only effects a quietening of the intellect and a diminution of the claims of the individual self, but also moves us towards an embrace of our material finitude. At the conclusion of the poem the bones under the sand—which in Chamberlain's work are a constant *memento mori* and which in R. S. Thomas' poem become merely a dusty irritant, divested of significance—are implicated in a dynamic and healing process involving the weed and the tides in a passage that reads as a lyrical evocation of choreographies of becoming:

> Dark sea-tresses
> strain back from graves beneath the sand.
> In the fetch of the seventh further-reaching wave
> shiver in the shell that will be flotsam;
> watch energy becoming froth,
> bright spray turn to scum, but
> dry to a tracery
> of old healed scars. (14-15)[17]

[17] Alice Entwistle notes that this poem was written about Pen Llyn beach on the mainland but included in the *Island of Dark Horses* collection as if it were about the island (2013: 70)

It is clear that the graves beneath the sand do not hold the same horror for Evans as they do for Chamberlain. When asked whether the legend of the twenty thousand saints and the physical presence of bones in the island earth had had a personal impact on her or had influenced her work, Evans replied, 'not so much', elaborating:

> I've seen skulls. When they dug a trench to put the generators in they came across a whole row of graves of very old skulls buried west to east,[…] and the workmen put the skulls on the wall so there was a whole row of all of them facing you. So yes, there are bones in the ground, but then if you think about it, we all live where there must be bones. (2013: n.p.)

This calm acceptance points up a sense in Evans' work that our ultimate materiality—our death and bodily decay—is merely one aspect of the unceasing round of nascence, decay and renascence in which all matter is involved, and is a phenomenon to be welcomed rather than feared. In the same interview she states: 'I find that immensely comforting, to think that you're going to be remade […]' (2013: n.p.). Perhaps because of this perception, death itself is characterised as a form of healing. In *Bardsey,* for example, Evans dismisses nineteenth century stories of a healing well on the island that might cure its supplicants, stating, 'The way the island healed was with death' (2008: 159). In a corollary perception, she characterises the dissolution and decay we experience in the process of aging as revelatory—we are all, in sense, waiting for the joys and vicissitudes of life to reveal us to ourselves, waiting to see 'What brinks, what late-summer vistas/ We are all ripening towards' (1995: 31).

Evans brings this sense of death as redemptive to a deeply compassionate and respectful poem in which she negotiates her feelings about Brenda Chamberlain. 'Brenda and the Golden Snake' in many respects pinpoints what Evans sees as the key aspects of Chamberlain's relationship with Bardsey. One strand of this is Chamberlain's deeply involved participation in the more-than-human world—her sense of our material entanglement with rock, for example: 'She held time in a stone within her hand/ fitted her finger to that ancestral groove' (1995: 59). Evans also sees Chamberlain as creating a 'songline', which sings both the text and the physical island into continued mutual existence, revealing and even facilitating the emergence of their various agencies and significations:

> She woke the whiteness of the page:
>
> rocks opened their dumb mouths
>
> and the sea's horizon danced.
>
> Seals swam in the wake of her singing (58)

At the same time, however, Evans is conscious of Chamberlain's susceptibility to the cultural troping of the island and to her own tendency to mythologise her life: she 'sought an island/ treasures from the sea/ and a fiction of herself' (1995: 58). Counterbalancing the deep sensitivities to the more-than-human world evident in Chamberlain's work, is the awareness that the island home of her heart did not offer her the peace she craved, and that her sense of embodiment faltered in the face of her metaphysical longings:

> No sanctuary of the mind:
> the framework of escape had closed her in.
> She knew a hunger to be bodiless
> travelling through obsessions
> towards the someplace that might prove itself
> a porch of infinity. (60)

This is a perceptive reading of Chamberlain's chorography which suggests that it was the cultural framework that informed her quest for 'escape' that ultimately imprisoned her: her desire for an island home of her heart ironically rendered her unenworlded, with a 'hunger to be bodiless', always searching for a stepping off point for transcendence. Perhaps this is why in the closing stanzas of the poem Evans imagines Chamberlain finally in an emphatically vital material embrace: we see her sucked down into the darkness 'like a blown seed' (61)—perhaps the 'winged thistle seed' that once gave Chamberlain a moment of existential joy (1996: 90)—'a gasp/ the ocean heals itself around' (Evans 1995: 61). Thus she is embraced into the redemptive and ongoing processes of the natural world, and given a voice that lives on in the island's natureculture. Evans ends the poem, 'Fragments of her voyage go on singing' (61).

For Evans, just as death does not signify an ending, the choreographies of island life are not seen as being restricted to the dimension of time we perceive as being the 'present'—they partake of the whole history of the island. Like Chamberlain, she seems to experience island time as multi-dimensional, concurrent time. In *Bardsey*, recalling Robinson's setting of Árainn in deep space-time, she writes of our new-found ecological sense of the earth as fragile, and our own pocket of time as tiny compared with the immensity of geological time:

> What we see as a long history is only the top layer, infinitesimally thin and temporary—a sea-bed of the future. Except that the past here doesn't feel drowned and gone: rather it is as though different presents go on flowing, like the currents that gave the island its original name in Welsh, *ynys yn y lli* […] in a continuous churning and recycling. (2008: 126)

'Island of Dark Horses', the final sequence of poems, which both gives the collection its name and brings it to a close, gives us a multi-layered island in which many presents go on flowing. Evans notes, 'A sense of other lives often rises on Bardsey' (2008: 126), and so we find that these poems are populated by a host of islanders, human and more-than-human, sentient and non-sentient, living and dead. This population, of course, includes the dead saints. These figures who in *Tide-race* float, lost, in some cold cosmic limbo, are re-animated here, brought back to a kind of parallel life in which they co-habit with contemporary islanders, almost pacing by their side.

The sequence, divided into sections headed 'Lauds', 'Prime', 'Terce', 'Sext', 'None', 'Vespers', and 'Compline', follows the daily pattern of canonical hours the inhabitants of the Abbey would have followed. The opening poem begins with an imaginative reconstruction of the arrival of the first 'holy men' on the island. Thus begins an italicised narrative recounting of 'past' time which runs parallel to non-italicised vignettes of contemporary island life. So we see Elgar speaking to Caradoc: '*He is thin and threadbare, his voice uncertain*' (1995: 79); and monks witnessing the destruction of the abbey in 1537: '*They have rehearsed the rote of older raids/ and returns, and vowed no flinching/ when the smashing starts*' (90), as well as present-day islanders: Susan's 'dreaming up an island produce show/ for the Observatory' (80); and Dic the stonemason 'repairs a hundred years' loosening and decay/ on the castellated walls' (83). What quickly becomes apparent, though, is that the 'peopling' of the place does not take precedence over other forms of life. Hence we are also given snap-shots of purposeful and animated more-than-human inhabitants, who are portrayed with equally detailed attention—a shearwater waiting for night, 'held by the warmth of her silent egg'; jelly fish 'pulsing slowly/ like gas mantles, translucent/ parachutes of intelligence' (85-86).

It is also clear that all of these inhabitants' lives and subjectivities are interwoven, separated by only the most ephemeral of barriers. In 'Sext' Evans writes of children playing outside the cave 'where Elgar went to ground' (1995: 80) and razorbills returning from the sea, commenting: 'Only a bubble of consciousness divides us' (80). We are given a sense here of the shared and shareable minds Wheeler writes of, and of consciousness not as presenting a fixed impediment to enworldedness, but as a thin membrane that here, as elsewhere in the collection, might easily be breached by the sensuous dissolution of the 'self' Evans describes in 'Waves'. In fact, something like that is enacted in 'Vespers', where the different 'presents' seem to coalesce in Evans' evocation of 'the pulse of this place' (86), which includes along with the hum of bees, the saints with their 'plainsong,

pacing footsteps' (86).The island's pulse seems to bring all of these elements together, blending their voices into a coherent song, which even includes 'young in the womb' (86). This idea of bringing the unborn into the narrative, of course, resonates with Harrison's notion of perpetuating the story of humanity through our dealings with the dead. But this is a more complex formulation. The dead do not seem to exert a necrocratic power here—they merely participate in the island's confederation of beings. Likewise, it is clearly not just humans who contribute to the island story, and the story itself is not just that of humanity, but the far more polyphonic song of animate matter; thus, if we can only be *brought to our senses* we will see that 'the chaos is in harmony' (92).

Somehow, in her poetry, Evans manages to embrace with apparent ease the kind of dualities, paradoxes and contradictions that Bardsey and its islandnesses represent. It is perhaps in part a result of her choice of form, for, as Mary Jacobus suggests, lyric poetry provides 'a way of thinking about (and linking) material and immaterial things' (2010: 2), but also, more significantly, the result of Evans' own ecophilosophy, through which she finds a means of articulating a holistic islandness in which choreography and chorography are strands that intertwine. Thus Bardsey is both 'an island where so many came to die', but also 'peopled', a 'fragment of land' that is also 'a whole place' where everything is balanced 'between the tide's/ twin ceremonies of darkness and light' (Evans 1995: 75). The last word, as it were, of the collection is given to the shearwaters, who rather than filling the air with evil, as they do in *Tide-race*, mediate between those twin ceremonies of darkness and light, surging home at moonset while the humans sleep, over a biosemiotically resonant 'sea splashed with stars, a glitter of shed scales' (93).

Conclusion

This chapter has carried out a reading of two Bardsey-based texts, applying concepts drawn from material ecocriticism and comparing the ways in which Chamberlain and Evans negotiate the island's vibrant more-than-human world along with its cultural legacies and specific association with death. The island seems to offer an intensification of the relationship between self and world, fostering a profound sense of material immersion, and leading to the use of literary devices that can be seen as more-than-metaphorical. However, in the case of Chamberlain, elements of embodied and enworlded apprehension of the island space are overshadowed by traumatic personal experiences, a certain revulsion at some of the processes of the material world, and by leanings towards the metaphysical and the mythic, articulated in a hybrid, complex literary form. Cumulatively

her work represents a mapping of the island that seems to militate against any consistent sense of harmonious immersion. Here choreographies of becoming give rise to more ambiguous chorographies, a phenomenon compounded by Chamberlain's overriding sense of human mortality as signifying a loss and a diminishment that ultimately disrupt meaning and corrupt the life still being lived.

In Evans' work, by contrast, we find a profoundly holistic vision, which presents us with a polyphonic but ultimately harmonious tale, in which human and more-than-human worlds are brought together in a creative confederation. It is a perspective that acknowledges death as a process occurring within the material dance of life—a vital cycle in which culture itself is implicated— so that the Bardsey texts from the *Life of Elgar* to *Tide-race* itself, flow into each other, exchange cultural matter, and keep on singing. At the same time, as the tension between the readings of the two texts demonstrates, the complexities of Bardsey's natureculture that have emerged leave some questions hanging, and expose some possible faultlines in a perspective focused on a deep ecological interpretation of material ecocriticism. Just as my investigation of Robinson's 'good step' found that islandness promises totality but delivers excess, and suggests a complex, dialectical form of dwelling, this chapter's exploration of the potential for immersion in a world of vibrant matter again finds both island and human exceeding the bounds of the paradigm.

For Timothy Morton it is not sufficient to simply replace one ontology with another. His 'ecological thought' ultimately 'means not swapping our dualism and our mechanism for something that seems nicer, such as vitalism or monism' (2010: 124). A material reading with its declared openness to the manifold and complex ways in which capacities and subjectivities emerge cannot entirely afford to dismiss the subjectivities that disrupt our immersion, even if they have come about as the result of disputed forms of metaphysics or constructivist cultural legacies, since, in a sense, these frameworks have themselves arisen through our participation in what Bennett calls the 'onto-tale' (2010: 10) of matter. This tension between the two versions of Bardsey is indicative of the complexity of posthumanist ecology, which involves both immersion and otherness. As such the chapter represents an amendment to the deep ecological strand of material ecocriticism. Once again the island, with its powerful naturalcultural association with death, has been instrumental in revealing this tension—this ambiguity in which nature and culture are both interrelated but ultimately pull apart—leaving us with the sense of a need to continue to explore the nature of the human, albeit within a posthumanist ontology. We are, no doubt,

vibrant bodies participating in choreographies of becoming, lending our voices to the song of matter. In *Island of Dark Horses* the many voices are brought into a kind of harmony. However, as *Tide-race* demonstrates, sometimes we falter in our singing, unenworlded by the very subjectivities, capacities and potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously, as Coole and Frost suggest, in the midst of the dance of life and in the interplay of matter and consciousness.

Chapter 3

'The emptiness within and the emptiness without': Orford Ness and the resistance of melancholy

Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experience they have had with us inside them and are - in fact - the book of our history opened before us.
—W. G. Sebald, 'As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese' from *Unrecounted*

If this were the history of a civilisation
it might be a footnote, towards the end.
—Christine Evans, 'Postcard'

Melancholie […] ist eine Form des Widerstands
—W. G. Sebald, Foreword to *Beschriebung des Unglücks*

Introduction: Orford Ness

Chapter 2 explored the notion of human immersion in a world of vibrant matter, and considered the island as a natureculture. It argued that Bardsey did indeed encourage and facilitate a sense of the agency and vitality of the more-than-human world and offered, at least in its representation in the work of Christine Evans, the possibility of a profoundly holistic, immersive experience. However, that immersion was disturbed in the work of Brenda Chamberlain by the implications of some of the darker phenomenologies of island life, and in both texts by the ways in which cultural tropes and associations, even if initially generated by the power of Bardsey itself, inflected and sometimes disrupted the writers' relationship with the island's material being. These aspects were explored in the chapter using the concepts of material 'choreographies' and, as suggested by the use of the term in Damian Walford Davies' work on Brenda Chamberlain, more personal, culturally-inflected 'chorographies', with the argument hinging, ultimately, on the writers' negotiation of Bardsey's powerful association with death. The tensions that emerged throughout the chapter raised questions about human consciousness and the interplay of nature and culture, suggesting the need for emerging posthumanist ecocritical approaches to retain a strand of investigation devoted to human subjectivity.

This is a perspective carried over into and explored further in this chapter, which takes as its subject the account in W. G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* of the almost-island of Orford Ness. *The Rings of Saturn* (subtitled in the original German-language edition *Eine englische Wallfahrt*—An English Pilgrimage) documents a journey on foot through

the East of England, with a narrative delivered by a semi-fictionalised narrator-figure. It was first published in Germany in 1995, with the English translation by Michael Hulse coming out in 1998, and represents a hybrid form that combines history, fiction, travel writing, and memoir.[1] In contrast to Chapters 1, 2 and 4, whose primary source material is relatively extensive, this chapter's main focus is a short passage that takes up only five or six pages. Sebald's writing itself differs from other works studied in the thesis because it is read here in translation. Its inclusion in a research project that is otherwise concerned with Anglophone texts is justified both by the fact that its subject is an island in the British and Irish archipelago, and by the increasingly canonical status of Sebald's oeuvre within the field of English Literature, especially the four major works published in Germany between 1990 and 2001 and subsequently translated into English: *Vertigo* (2002a [1990]); *The Emigrants* (2002b [1993]); *The Rings of Saturn* (2002c [1995]); and *Austerlitz* (2002d [2001]). Moreover, I would also contend that the notion of translation—both linguistic, and more broadly in terms of receiving and processing another person's account of experience—is integral to the kind of islandness that emerges in the chapter.

Sebald's work is also distinguished from that of the other authors studied in this thesis in that it has, to date, undoubtedly attracted the most critical attention, with studies of his writing proliferating rapidly in a variety of disciplines since his untimely death in 2001. There is a substantial and growing body of critical work in German and European Studies, English Literary Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and a range of theoretical approaches that include psychoanalytic readings, largely focused on Sebald's characteristic 'melancholy' (e.g. Cosgrove 2006; 2007; 2014; Görner 2004; Kaufmann 2008; and Löffler 2003), and interpretations through the lens of Trauma Theory and Memory Studies (e.g. Denham and McCulloh 2006; Osborne 2013). There has been particular interest in Sebald's preoccupation with the Holocaust (e.g. Crownshaw 2010) and also in what he saw as the problematic failure of German literature and German society more widely to acknowledge and articulate the suffering of the German people during the Second World War.[2] Despite perhaps not being an *explicitly* environmental writer, Sebald is also increasingly attracting the attention of ecocritics. Colin Riordan sees the concerns of Sebald's prose-poem *After Nature,* and more generally the complex interweaving of

[1] Sebald's publisher, Christopher MacLehose of Harvill and MacLehose Presses, interviewed in the Grant Gee film *Patience: After Sebald* (2010), recounts asking Sebald which category he would like *Rings of Saturn* to be in. According to MacLehose, Sebald replied, 'Oh, I'd like all the categories. I want fiction, I want biography, I want autobiography, I want travel, I want history.' Sebald's description of the form of Bruce Chatwin's writings could just as easily be applied to his own: 'All that is obvious is that their structure and intentions place them in no known genre' (Sebald 2006: 179).

[2] This is a view Sebald articulates forcefully in *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2003b).

themes in his oeuvre as a whole, as enabling us 'to see ourselves in context, to think in terms of connective processes' (2004: 46), and as essentially ecocentric. Like Riordan, Axel Goodbody outlines the rich potential of the complex interconnections revealed by Sebald's hybrid literary form for the contemplation of ecological issues, suggesting that, along with the Holocaust, 'Nature and the place of human beings in it' (2013: 336) are the central concerns of his work. Anne Fuchs describes Sebald's prose as itself 'eco-critical' (2007: 137), and brings his themes of the Holocaust and nature firmly together in a powerfully social-ecological reading of his work.

Just as this chapter represents something of an anomaly in terms of its close focus on a small excerpt from a single text, Orford Ness is marked out from the other islands studied in the thesis, both by its location in the east of the archipelago and by the fact that it is an 'almost-island', a shingle peninsula joined to the Suffolk coast at its northern end, but then separated from the mainland by a tidal river known to the north as the Alde and to the south as the Ore. Despite this feature, the Ness is known in the local area (and in Sebald's account) as 'The Island'—a phenomenon I discuss later in the chapter—conceptually, if not geographically, islanded. It stretches for around 16km with a maximum width of about 1.5km (Cocroft and Alexander 2009: 8), and is a landscape in 'continual slow migration' (Macfarlane 2008: 241), the shingle acted on by tides, currents and seasonal storms. The sense that Bardsey brought us of an almost animal-like vitality and agency is intensified here by that motion. The shingle spits of this area are, for Robert Macfarlane, 'as close to organism as anything only mineral can be' (2008: 241). Likewise, while some of the discussion that has already featured in the thesis revolves around the notion of islands as porous and permeable, in the case of Orford Ness, this feature is more tangibly evident. Macfarlane explains that, unlike the materially distinct meeting of rock and water on the north-western coasts of Britain, on these eastern coasts 'the land is constantly ceding to the sea, or weaving with it. There is an eerieness to these littorals, born of their perpetual motion, and the dialogue between solid and liquid' (2008: 242).

The sense of eeriness is amplified on Orford Ness by the fact that for much of the 20th century the place was the site of a military base whose operations were shrouded in secrecy. The information cited in this paragraph is drawn from an English Heritage document by Wayne Cocroft and Magnus Alexander (2009), which gives a detailed account of the military history of the Ness. The place was primarily used for the development and testing of weaponry, though it also housed German prisoners during the First World War (12). Early research on radar was carried out here, followed, during the

Cold War, by the establishment of the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE). Special chambers (resembling East Asian pagodas) were built for thermal and vibration tests on atomic bombs (21). After the closure of AWRE in 1972, the Royal Air Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit took charge of the site, working to clear the range until their final departure in 1986, though many unexploded munitions remain (26). To the north of the spit lies the Orfordness[3] transmitting station, with its range of radio masts, built by the British Government and used at the height of the Cold War as part of the Cobra Mist project to develop over-the-horizon radar systems. The station was used between 1986 and 2011 for broadcasting the BBC World Service on 648 kHz, establishing the Ness in a kind of global archipelago of the airwaves. Though the island was acquired by the National Trust in 1993 and parts of it are now open to visitors, the site is still littered with the remnants of its military history.[4] At the same time, and despite the uses to which its environment has been put, the Ness is a 'rare and fragile natural environment' (6), an important habitat for bird, plant and insect life, and a designated Environmental Sensitive Area, Site of Special Scientific Interest, Special Protection Area, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Ramsar.[5]

After a brief account of the narrative of Sebald's Orford Ness episode, this chapter pursues three readings of the excerpt, all linked but all taking slightly different approaches. Sebald, like Robinson, Chamberlain and Evans, demonstrates an awareness of both the romantic traditions of landscape writing and the specific literary tropes of islandness, and so the first strand explores the way in which he negotiates these legacies, looking in particular at the relationship between the Orford Ness extract and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's description of his stay on the Île Saint-Pierre in the Lac de Bienne in Switzerland, which features in the 'Fifth Walk' of *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The discussion reflects on the tension between Rousseau's island idyll and Sebald's darker picture. In order to investigate this tension further, the second strand brings the perspectives of material ecocriticism to bear on the text. While Chapter 2 engaged with ideas that owed much to

[3] Though the name of the island according to the Ordnance Survey maps is Orford Ness, the two words are sometimes run together as Orfordness, as in Sebald's description, and in accounts specifically discussing the transmitting station.

[4] Macfarlane's account is eloquent in its description of the abandoned military paraphernalia in the landscape:

> All across the Ness, enigmatic military structures still protrude from the shingle — pre-fabricated military barracks, listening stations, beacons, watch-towers, bunkers, explosion chambers. (2008: 256)

His description also powerfully conjures up the sense of destruction and material decay at work:

> By the sides of the pathways we were following lay military debris: twisted sprays of tank tracking, a shattered concrete block, and an exploded boiler, whose inch-thick iron casing had flared into bright rusted thick petals: warnings not to stray. (256)

[5] Protected wetland site http://www.ramsar.org/wetland/united-kingdom (19/1/15)

deep ecological and ecophenomenological approaches, and invoked notions of ecology as a web of interrelated and interdependent vibrant forces, this chapter focuses on more dissonant forms of material immersion. As Jane Bennett herself stresses, in her 'onto-tale' (2010: 118) of agentic matter she is not necessarily proposing a harmonious immersion. She warns us: 'in contrast to some versions of deep ecology, my monism posits neither a smooth harmony of parts nor a diversity unified by a common spirit' (2010: ix).

This chapter, then, explores the interplay between the narrator-figure and the kinds of material phenomena and combinations of phenomena that Serenella Iovino defines as the 'nonhuman and posthuman realm of other sources of action—those entities Bruno Latour calls 'actants': electric grids, polluting substances, chemicals, energy, assemblages, scientific apparatuses, cyborgs, waste […]' (2012: 52). The discussion employs, in particular, the concept of the *assemblage*—a term that implies a dissonant, random collection of phenomena rather than a smooth harmony of parts. As Manuel DeLanda stresses, 'unlike organic totalities, the parts of an assemblage do not form a seamless whole' (2006: 4), but groupings whose 'properties emerge from the interactions between parts' (5), mingling areas of life previously considered to be disparate, such as the biological, the political, the technological, the geographical, and the historical.

In fact, the assemblage is a concept that seems extraordinarily applicable to the almost-island of Orford Ness, with its constant (gradual) territorial shape-shifting and its bringing together in one apparently bounded location of a range of disparate phenomena that includes material objects, history, the narrator, memory, politics, the paraphernalia of war, radio waves, and so on. Through a close reading of Sebald's account, the chapter engages once again with the idea of 'things' as agentic and powerful, bringing into play Iovino and Oppermann's second approach to material ecocriticism: the exploration of 'matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions' (2012: 79). The discussion of these co-emerging interactions also applies recent theorisations from the field of Affect Studies[6] in order to draw out the implications of the affective impact of the Ness assemblage upon Sebald's narrator.

The predominance of troubling affective resonances in the Orford Ness episode, as well as in Sebald's oeuvre more generally, perhaps invites an assessment of his attitude to the world as dominated by a melancholy that might be seen as almost pathological in its

[6] A correspondence discussed in more detail in relation to Orford Ness in my essay ''Heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery': Assemblages, ethics and affect in W. G. Sebald's Orford Ness' (2014b).

nature. However, in the Preface to his essay collection *Die Beschriebung des Unglücks*[7] Sebald suggests the possibility for a positive rehabilitation of melancholy, arguing that it is 'eine Form des Widerstands' (1985: 12): a form of resistance. Sebald's melancholy resistance is a topic that has already received some critical attention, but the third strand of the chapter takes the enquiry in a relatively new direction, expanding on previous ecocritical approaches to Sebald and exploring the implications for ecological thought of the kind of resistance that emerges in the Orford Ness episode—a phenomenon to which the island itself is integral through its own resistance to cultural encapsulation, and its ability, as I discuss later in the chapter, to suggest its own metaphors.

Sebald's Orford Ness

Like the Thoreauvian saunterer or the walkers of narrative scholarship, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* views the walking tour upon which he is about to embark as holding the promise of psychic restoration. The book begins: 'In August 1992, when the dog days were drawing to an end, I set off to walk the county of Suffolk, in the hope of dispelling the emptiness that takes hold of me whenever I have completed a long stint of work' (2002c: 3). Readers familiar with tales of pilgrimage as well as the more generalised romantic traditions of nature writing would be forgiven for entertaining at this point certain expectations about the beneficial results of the journey. Walking is, after all, in Rebecca Solnit's words, 'a state in which the mind, the body and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation with one another, three notes suddenly making a chord' (2002: 5). However, even in the course of the very first paragraph those expectations are quashed and we are given a sense of misalignment and discord. Though at first he feels carefree as he moves through the landscape, the narrator almost immediately finds his joyful spirit dissipating:

> At all events, in retrospect I became preoccupied not only with the unaccustomed sense of freedom but also with the paralysing horror that had come over me at various times when confronted with the traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place. (Sebald 2002c: 3)

As Susan Sontag notes of this work, 'whereas the traditional walking tour brought one closer to nature, here it measures degrees of devastation' (2000: n.p.). In fact, a year to the day after beginning his journey, the narrator/Sebald (it is difficult to distinguish with any certainty between the two) is hospitalised, immobilised by his reaction to that devastation.

[7] Due for publication in an English translation by Jo Catling in 2016.

And nowhere are the 'traces of destruction' more evident than when he reaches the 'almost-island' of Orford Ness, an episode he describes briefly towards the end of the book.

Sebald sets the scene for his visit to Orford Ness by discussing the stories circulating in the local community about the various military research establishments that have existed not just on the island but around Orford more generally. He writes of the eerie radio masts at Bawdsey, 'which could sometimes be heard creaking in the night' (2002c: 230) and the general secrecy surrounding the wartime function of the research establishments in the area that 'gave rise to all manner of speculation about an invisible web of death rays, a new kind of nerve gas, or some hideous means of mass destruction that would come into play if the Germans attempted a landing' (231). While this description carries a hint of satire at the extravagance of such speculation, the narrator goes on to detail his own encounters with these rumours in a manner that has the effect of lending them more plausibility: 'I myself heard, for instance, that experiments were conducted at Shingle Street with biological weapons designed to make whole regions uninhabitable' (231). This very direct link between weaponry and the environment immediately establishes a basis for ecocritical interest in the piece.

The secrecy surrounding the military base on Orford Ness itself adds to a sense of the island's remoteness and inaccessibility, despite the fact that it is *very* close (and indeed, as already noted, connected at its northern end) to the mainland. 'The Orfordness site', writes Sebald, 'though perfectly visible from the town, was effectively no easier to reach than the Nevada desert or an atoll in the South Seas' (2002c: 233). What makes it seem difficult to reach is perhaps more a conceptual than a physical barrier. According to Sebald, the Secret Weapons Research Establishments 'imposed the strictest silence on the work carried out in them' (233), and this perhaps creates an increased sense of isolation. Paddy Heazell, in his comprehensive history of military activity on the Ness, quotes correspondence from within the British War Office that suggests that it was the perceived remoteness and island topography of the place that contributed to its being chosen for secret military testing: 'Purchase of some land at Orford Ness is about to be completed […] This station, which is on an island, [sic] is required to enable certain experimental work to be carried on in privacy' (2013: 29). While the Ness is located at the furthest edge of Suffolk, thus perhaps being remote from more densely populated areas, there is perhaps an element here of a deliberate perpetuation of the 'myth of island isolation' (DeLoughrey 2007: 2) in order to legitimise the kind of work undertaken there—a myth DeLoughrey

sees as encouraging the perception of islands as 'ultimately disposable' (2013: 173), or, as Baldacchino suggests, as 'tabulae rasae: potential laboratories for any conceivable human project, in thought or in action' (2006: 5-6).

In his mention of the Nevada desert and the South Seas, Sebald is, of course, alluding to the testing of nuclear bombs at the Nevada Test Site in the US and in the Pacific Marshall Islands. This again forges a link, albeit implicitly, between the preparations for war and both environmental destruction and social injustice, since these are environments that have famously (or rather, infamously) been left degraded and polluted with toxic waste, and in which human inhabitants have suffered higher than average incidences of cancer and other illnesses.[8] Through these allusions Sebald conjures a sense of the inextricable interweaving of international politics and biological effects in the island assemblage. In drawing out these connections, his work can be seen as enacting, perhaps more fully than any other work studied in this thesis, Doreen Massey's conceptual model in which the identity of place is 'open and porous' (1994: 5), and defined 'through the specificity of the mix of links and interconnections *to* [the] 'beyond'' (5), and effecting, perhaps, a retying of Bruno Latour's naturalcultural 'Gordian knot' (1993: 3) in which nature and culture, biology and politics, are closely interwoven.

As already noted, this deeply rooted sense of interconnection also renders Sebald's work profoundly ecological,[9] and establishes a kind of dark archipelagraphy between the Ness and other areas of the world, both in terms of *literal* islands and more *conceptual* islands such as the Nevada desert.[10] In addition to evoking these geographical points of contact, Sebald also makes use of literary allusion. The island, to the narrator's eye, looks

[8] Rebecca Solnit, for example, calls the Nevada test site the 'most bombed place on earth' (2007: 1), an area in which radioactive fallout gives the lie to place as a bounded discrete entity, either ecologically or politically. Elizabeth DeLoughrey's discussion of the nuclear experiments on the Marshall Islands also challenges the 'myth of isolates' (2012: 167) and notes that the nuclear radiation that followed the 'Bravo' trials contributed to 'countless miscarriages, leukaemia deaths, thyroid cancers, and the kind of chromosome damage that knows no temporal or genealogical limit' (2012: 171).

[9] A cartographic 'litmap' response to *The Rings of Saturn* by the artist Barbara Hui (n.d.), which maps all the geographical connections in the work, looks in many respects like a pictorial representation of Timothy Morton's concept of the ecological 'mesh' (2010: 8): an image without a clear geographical centre, in which lines of connection criss-cross the globe.

[10] In a description that makes more literal another form of islandness that has previously featured in the thesis as a trope, and draws a closer parallel between the Ness and Nevada, Macfarlane calls the Ness a 'desert' (2008: 241)—not this time the 'desert in the sea' sought after by the Celtic holy *peregrini*, but an actual expanse of shingle, used, as Macfarlane notes, like other larger deserts such as the Mojave in America, the Great Victoria in Australia and the Kizil Kum in Kazakhstan, for ordnance testing.

like ‘a penal colony in the Far East’ (2002c: 233). This is, very possibly, a reference to Kafka’s short story ‘In the Penal Colony’, a piece discussed by Sebald in his essay ‘Strangeness, Integration and Crisis: On Peter Handke’s play *Kaspar*’ (2006: 62), and identified as an undercurrent in Sebald’s own *Austerlitz* by Judith Ryan (2012: 151). In all of these references Sebald appears to be exploring the kind of tropes of islandness identified in island studies—the island as prison, for example, and the island as site of experimentation—but here they can be seen to be naturalcultural readings of the Ness rather than the simple perpetuation of culturally constructed island tropes, since the place was actually used to house German prisoners during WWI and was, as we have seen, for much of the 20th century the site of military testing.

The Ness landscape is one that seems to hold a particular fascination for Sebald, due, at least in part, to the geological genesis of the island. It has an ‘extra-territorial quality’ (Sebald 2002c: 233), perhaps generated by the way in which the shingle has been gradually moving, over a period of millennia,

> down from the north across the mouth of the River Alde, in such a way that the tidal lower reaches, known as the Ore, run for some twelve miles just inside the present coastline before flowing into the sea. (233)

It is this extra-territorial quality, along with the sense that it is a landmass engaged in continual shapeshifting, that sets the scene for the intense experience of dislocation and disorientation that follows. The encounter of Sebald’s narrator with the Ness is, from the start, full of foreboding. When he makes the crossing to the island, his references to the ‘ferryman’ (234) inevitably conjure Charon, the ferryman of classical mythology, carrying the souls of the dead over the rivers Styx and Acheron to Hades. Sebald’s ferryman himself adds to this sense of incipient horror, suggesting that in spite of its now being open to the public, people still avoided Orford Ness. He tells the narrator that even the beach-fishermen, accustomed as they were to solitude, had given up night-fishing there ‘because they couldn’t stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere, and in some cases even became emotionally disturbed for some time’ (234).

The state of the narrator as he steps onto the island is one of utter blankness: ‘I had not a single thought in my head. With each step that I took, the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound’ (2002c: 234). However, when he startles a hare hiding in the grass beside him, the episode remains etched into his mind, and though the incident is remembered with clarity, it also marks a moment in which animal and human become disorientatingly indistinguishable:

> In that very fraction of a second when its paralysed state turned into panic and flight, its fear cut right through me. I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and every individual blade of grass, I see the hare leaping out of its hiding-place, with its ears laid back and a curiously human expression on its face that was rigid with terror and strangely divided; and in its eyes, turning to look back as it fled and almost popping out of its head with fright, I see myself, become one with it. (235)

It seems to the narrator from this point onwards that he is crossing into some kind of fearful *terra incognita,* separated from all that is familiar to him. While the other compass points offer glimpses of the known for the narrator, ahead lies 'nothing but destruction' (235).

The mysterious mounds of the bomb-testing site have a similarly disorientating effect, initially resembling, despite the narrator's knowledge of the real history of the place, the site of pre-historic burials:

> From a distance, the concrete shells, shored up with stones, in which for most of my lifetime hundreds of boffins had been at work devising new weapons systems, looked (probably because of their odd conical shape) like the tumuli in which the mighty and powerful were buried in prehistoric times with all their tools and utensils, silver and gold. (2002c: 235-6)

This observation is possibly prompted in part by the Ness' geographical proximity to Sutton Hoo, the site of the ship burial of an Anglo-Saxon king, Raedwald—which features in Sebald's earlier poem *After Nature* (2003a [1988]: 106)—and, as such, represents a subtle allusion which has the effect perhaps of rendering all the more strange to the reader the actual activities carried out by the boffins of Orford Ness. The shapes of the buildings themselves continue to suggest for the narrator the feeling of being in some kind of sacred place: 'My sense of being on ground intended for purposes transcending the profane was heightened by a number of buildings that resembled temples or pagodas, which seemed quite out of place in these military installations' (236-7). However, as he draws closer 'the notion of a mysterious isle of the dead' (237) recedes and the structures develop for him into 'the image of the remains of our civilization after its extinction in some future catastrophe' (237). They lead him to imagine the landscape being walked by a future visitor for whom, as for the narrator, the nature of the long-departed inhabitants of the place is a mystery:

> To me too, as for some latter-day stranger ignorant of the nature of our society wandering about among heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery, the beings who had once lived and worked here were an enigma, as was the purpose of the primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers, the iron rails under the ceilings, the hooks on the still partially tiled walls, the showerheads the size of plates, the ramps and the soakaways. (237)

Christopher C. Gregory-Guider has suggested that in Sebald's works 'Places do not remain in place' (2005: 422): they are not 'reliably located in space-time' (423). The time frame here is certainly unreliable, not firmly located in the past but made wholly ambiguous, as the narrator's imagination travels from pre-history to the aftermath of a catastrophe which has signalled the extinction of our civilisation in an unspecified future time. In this Sebald has deliberately exaggerated a sense of temporal distance from the beings who once lived and worked on the Ness. As he would almost certainly have been aware, less than a decade had passed between the departure of the last service personnel from the site and the publication of *The Rings of Saturn.* The temporal 'unreliability' of the scene suggests a more dissonant, disruptive form of concurrent time than that which has emerged thus far in the thesis, since different strands of time not only seem to exist simultaneously but are extended into the imagined future as well as the speculative past. Moreover, the place is seen as implicitly involving histories not apparently *directly* connected with the Ness—a theme explored later in this chapter in my discussion of the traces of the Holocaust—also rendering the scene spatially unreliable. The sense of spatiotemporal dislocation, along with the inability to fathom the nature of the beings responsible for the scraps of metal and defunct machinery, leaves the narrator utterly disorientated: 'Where and in what time I truly was that day at Orford Ness I cannot say' (237).

As the narrator watches the sun setting, sees the tide advancing up the river, and listens to the 'scarcely audible hum' (2002c: 237) of the radio masts above the marshes, he feels utterly displaced. Unlike Thoreau's saunterers who are at home everywhere, the narrator of *The Rings of Saturn* finds that he is no longer at home anywhere. Looking back at the town of Orford he thinks, 'There […] I was once at home' (237). It is an experience so devastating that it seems to negate the possibility of being at home anywhere ever again. The final sentence of the episode, though, perhaps provides a glimmer of hope. 'And then,' Sebald writes, 'through the growing dazzle of the light in my eyes, I suddenly saw, amidst the darkening colours, the sails of the long-vanished windmills turning heavily in the wind' (237). It is an oblique reference and hard to fathom, but the evocation of these former landmarks of the Suffolk coast, perhaps representing a more benign form of human building and dwelling (particularly since, in their conception, windmills pre-date the industrial revolution) than the abandoned military base of the Ness, arguably counterbalances the traces of horror immanent in the showerheads and rusting contraptions, and offers a vision of some possible but unspecified form of hope.

Disrupting the island idyll

As the account above suggests, the almost-island of Orford Ness provides a focus for the reassessment of certain existing literary tropes. Sebald can certainly be seen to be negotiating and challenging generalised romantic notions of the restorative properties of the walking tour. His evocation of the enigma of those who once lived and worked on Orford Ness might also be seen as containing elements of an *ubi sunt* (where are they?)[11] —a trope of medieval Latin poetry that often introduced a reflection on human mortality and represented a lament for the makers of the landmarks of civilisation, those monuments to 'humanity' that inevitably crumble with the passing of time. It is a form that has been associated with melancholy and re-worked in contemporary literature (see Bowring 2008: 108-9) and one that Sebald seems to be either unconsciously, or very subtly, referencing, particularly in his initial reading of the pagodas as 'tumuli in which the mighty and powerful were buried in prehistoric times with all their tools and utensils, silver and gold' (2002c: 236). The makers of the Orford Ness buildings are gone and their works are falling into decay. However, just as Sebald disrupts idealised notions of walking, so he turns the *ubi sunt* on its head. In part, this comes from the knowledge of what the 'makers' of Orford Ness have really been doing in the landscape—they are not mighty and powerful figures from pre-history buried on an isle of the dead, but 'boffins' (2002c: 236) who have, in Sebald's own lifetime, 'been at work devising new weapons systems' (236). Far from offering up a lament for these creators or even representing a comment on human hubris,[12] the narrator is reluctant even to identify the historic inhabitants of the scene as actually 'human': they are 'beings' (237) whose nature is apparently a complete mystery.

This reworking of an *ubi sunt* coupled with its questioning of the nature of those who came before, transforms the passage from a reflection on human mortality, to a *qui sunt* (who are they?) or even a *quae sunt* (what are they?), ultimately destabilising our sense of who or what the 'human' is. Given Cary Wolfe's posthumanist assertion that 'the human, we know now, is not and never was itself' (2010: xiii), this notion immediately lends weight to the conviction that Sebald's Orford Ness reflects a need to continue to investigate the specificities of the human within the framework of posthumanist thought. Timothy Morton, in *The Ecological Thought*, cites Levinas in his observation that 'Posthumanism seems suspiciously keen to delete the paradigm of humanness like a bad draft; yet "Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human"'

[11] From the Latin *ubi sunt qui ante nos fuerunt*: where are they who were before us?
[12] Hubris such as that explored in Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ozymandias' (2012: 66).

(2010: 113). This is an observation that resonates with Sebald's writing, since the thrust of his work, and especially this declared sense of puzzlement over the provenance of the sinister buildings of the Ness, seems to be to draw our attention, implicitly, to insufficiently or even unrecognisably human forms of humanity.

Orford Ness appears to be a locus for a particularly intensified sense of this insufficiency. Elements of islandness that in previous chapters have appeared as positive qualities, such as a heightened receptivity to the more-than-human world and the dissolution of the self into the surrounding environment, here combine with the island assemblage to devastating effect, rendering the island a place of confusion, horror and paralysis. Thus the Orford Ness passage as a whole can be read as a kind of dialogue with the romantic trope of islandness *per se* and with a writer Sebald calls 'the inventor of the bourgeois cult of romantic sensibility' (2014: 41), Rousseau. Not only can Rousseau be considered the instigator of romantic sensibility, but more specifically he has been identified as the progenitor of the modern cultural preoccupation with islands. Adam Nicolson finds in Rousseau's work the source of modern islomania. He writes:

> The grandfather of the modern love of islands, of all those visitors to the Hebrides, of Robert Louis Stevenson and Gauguin, is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was Rousseau who invented the idea that islands were not somehow less than what the world could give you, but the most perfect of places in which the solitary self could flower. (2001: 344)

Nicolson goes on to recount Rousseau's assertion that the island in the Lac de Bienne in Switzerland, on which in 1765 he took refuge for two months, was the one place in which he was able to find happiness. 'The Ile St Pierre',[13] Nicolson writes, 'was the Eden away from society that he sought' (345).

Sebald also visited Saint-Pierre and wrote an essay—in the form of narrative scholarship—both describing his own experience of the island and responding to Rousseau's account of his time spent there. This essay, 'J'aurais voulu que ce lac eût été l'ocean…: On the occasion of a visit to the Île Saint-Pierre', was posthumously translated and published in the collection *A Place in the Country* (2014 [2013]), but had been written following a visit to Saint-Pierre in 1996, one year after the publication in Germany of *Die Ringe des Saturn.* Sebald is also recorded (in an interview with Arthur Lubow for the *New York Times Magazine* given shortly before his death)[14] as saying that, of all the places in

[13] Written as the Île Saint-Pierre in Sebald's work.

[14] This interview was carried out in August 2001 as the basis for a profile of Sebald, but, as Lubow explains, the events of 9/11 intervened, delaying its publication. It finally came out in shortened form in December of that year, three days before Sebald's death. Lubow published a fuller account of the interview in *The*

the world, Saint-Pierre was the one spot he thought of as home. In the paragraphs that follow I combine a reading of the 'Fifth Walk' with reference to Sebald's essay and finally, notwithstanding Sebald's own apparent love of Saint-Pierre, I discuss the way in which his Orford Ness, through its dialogue with Rousseau's island, emerges as the inverse of Saint-Pierre, and as a repudiation of the notion of the island idyll. Thus, though his description of Orford Ness pre-dates his visit to Saint-Pierre and essay on the subject, I would argue that, nevertheless, Sebald is engaged in a subtle dialogue with Rousseau's 'Fifth Walk' throughout the Orford Ness passage and that he is consciously responding to and intervening in a discourse about islandness.

Rousseau begins the 'Fifth Walk': 'Of all the places where I have lived (and I have lived in some charming ones), none has made me so truly happy or left me such sweet regrets as the Île de St Pierre in the middle of the Lac de Bienne' (2011: 49). He feels that the island is 'wonderfully situated for the happiness of a man who likes to live within defined limits' (49). Here we see the notion of island boundedness immediately coming into play, the small island providing apparently fixed, comforting boundaries. Rousseau also seems quick to succumb to the kinds of 'dreams of total knowledge' (Macfarlane 2012: 111) that small islands inspire. Explaining that he no longer wants to 'work' (by which he means intellectual contemplation and writing), but needs instead a pastime that 'would not require any more effort than an idler could happily devote to it' (2011: 51), he outlines, in terms that resonate with Robinson's quest for the 'good step', his ambition 'to compose a *Flora petrinsularis* and to describe all the plants on the island, not leaving a single one out, in sufficient detail to keep me busy for the rest of my days' (51). He describes the absolute attentiveness of his focus: 'A German once wrote a book about a lemon rind; I could have written one on every grass in the meadows, on every moss in the woods, and on every lichen covering the rocks; in short I wanted every single blade of grass and atom of a plant to be fully described' (51-2).

Engaged in this study, Rousseau finds himself accessing an unprecedented state of contentment. This prompts a reflection on the difficult and transient nature of happiness. He argues:

> Everything on earth is in a state of constant flux. Nothing keeps the same, fixed shape, and our affections, which are attached to external things, like them necessarily pass away and change. Always beyond or behind us, they remind us of the past which is no longer or anticipate the future

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Threepenny Review (2002), which includes the information about Sebald's feelings for the Île Saint-Pierre and is the source of this reference.

> which is often not to be: there is nothing solid in them for the heart to become attached to. (2012: 55)

However, on the island of Saint-Pierre Rousseau finds the solidity and the consistency that he craves—a consistency that introduces, incidentally, a form of island time that differs from the kinds of concurrent time discussed in the previous chapter and that diverges radically from that of Sebald's Ness. It is located entirely in the present moment, a situation in which:

> the soul can find a position solid enough to allow it to remain there entirely and gather together its whole being, without needing to recall the past or encroach upon the future, where time is nothing to it, where the present lasts for ever, albeit imperceptibly and giving no sign of its passing, with no other feeling of deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear than simply that of our existence, a feeling that completely fills our soul; […]. Such is the state in which I often found myself on the Île de St Pierre in my solitary reveries […]. (55)

In this state, even the unaccustomed silence of the island can play into the development of this state of existential fulfillment. Reflecting on Saint-Pierre's silence, Rousseau hints at an underlying danger—'Absolute silence leads to sadness. It offers an image of death' (56)—but it is a danger that can be mitigated 'with the help of a cheerful imagination' (56) to the point at which 'light and pleasant ideas simply brush the surface of the soul' (56).

Sebald also finds himself charmed by the Île Saint-Pierre. In his essay on Rousseau he writes of seeing the island from a distance in 1965 and longing to visit it—an ambition he was not able to fulfil until 1996. Once *in situ* he reflects on Rousseau's feeling that he would happily have spent all eternity on the island, confessing that 'That […] is exactly how I felt when, returning at dusk from my walk on the first evening of my stay, I sat alone in the dining room of the hotel' (2014: 50). He also reports finding the 'same quality of silence' (43) noted by Rousseau. Lubow records that Sebald explained his own affection for the place in the following terms:

> 'I felt at home, strangely, because it is a miniature world,' he said. 'One manor house, one farmhouse. A vineyard, a field of potatoes, a field of wheat, a cherry tree, an orchard. It has one of everything, so it is in a sense an ark. It is like when you draw a place when you are a child. I don't like large-scale things, not in architecture or evolutionary leaps. I think it's an aberration. This notion of something that is small and self-contained is for me both an aesthetic and moral ideal. (2002: n.p.)

Nevertheless, Sebald also demonstrates an awareness of some of the dangers presented by this miniature world, identifying the somewhat obsessive aspect of Rousseau's dream of total botanical knowledge and pointing out the contradictory nature of his expressed intention to forgo 'work' followed by his immediate adoption of the task of writing in its

entirety the *Flora petrinsularis*. He argues that the dominant motif of Rousseau's description of his ambition is 'not so much the impartial insight into the indigenous plants of the island as that of ordering, classification and the creation of a perfect system' (2014: 55). Sebald has earlier in the essay noted Rousseau's almost desperate urge to cease the unrelenting processes going on in his mind: 'No one […] recognized the pathological aspect of thought as acutely as Rousseau, who himself wished for nothing more than to be able to halt the wheels ceaselessly turning within his head' (54). In the light of Rousseau's declared botanical ambitions he comments:

> Thus this apparently innocent occupation—the deliberate resolve no longer to think and merely to look at nature—becomes, for the writer plagued by the chronic need not to think and work, a demanding rationalistic project involving the compiling of lists, indices and catalogues. (55)

While 'J'aurais voulu' involves some critique of and gentle satire upon Rousseau's account of Saint-Pierre, pointing up the obsessive nature of his botanical quest and at certain points suggesting that his sojourn on the island was not quite 'such a peaceful time as Rousseau might in retrospect believe' (2014: 49), Sebald's essay is on the whole a compassionate account. At the point in his life at which he retreated to Saint-Pierre, Rousseau was, according to Sebald, a man 'on the point of utter physical and mental exhaustion' (44), persecuted for the radical content of his writings. He can perhaps be allowed his romanticisation of the island given the time at which it took place. Compared with the dark days that had come before his retreat to the island 'the Ile Saint-Pierre', Sebald writes, 'must truly have appeared to Rousseau […] as a paradise in miniature in which he might collect himself in a stillness' (48). However, the use of the modal constructions 'must truly have' and 'might' imply that Sebald himself has some doubts about this notion of a miniature Eden. Likewise, the first part of the title of Sebald's essay—'J'aurais voulu que ce lac eût été l'ocean' [I could have wished that this lake had been the ocean][15]—is a quotation from Rousseau's account of his stay on the Lac de Bienne in *Confessions* (1793: 313) in which he expresses his desire for escape and escapism as he rows across the lake. Sebald's foregrounding of this sentiment, with its tentative conditional form, perhaps reinforces the feeling that emerges in Sebald's own account that Rousseau's lake-island-idyll is a place of fantasy rather than reality.

In fact, there is a sense in which the entire Orford Ness passage can be seen as a riposte and a corrective to Rousseau's idealised island. It might be read as a meditation on the near impossibility of being at home in the world, and as one that points up in particular

[15] Translation mine.

the inappropriateness of the concept of the bounded island idyll, at least in the closing years of the 20th century. Sebald's narrator also comes to his island exhausted after a 'long stint of work' (2002c: 3), but for him there is no prospect of a 'perfect system' of reference. Rousseau's quest to record '*every single blade of grass* and atom of a plant' (2011: 51-2, emphasis mine) is reworked on Orford Ness as a form of knowledge traumatically imposed upon the narrator, and profoundly implicated in the horror of the place. After the incident of the startled hare, the narrator declares, 'I still see what occurred in that one tremulous instant with an undiminished clarity. I see the edge of the grey tarmac and *every individual blade of grass*' (2002c: 235, emphasis mine). On Sebald's island one cannot help but be haunted by the flora, as by every other aspect of the scene. Similarly, the blissfully existentialist sense of the uncorrupted present moment in Rousseau's Saint-Pierre—his feeling that here one might be untroubled by thoughts of the lost past and unrealisable ambitions for the future—is utterly repudiated by Sebald's Ness, in which the 'traces of destruction' wrought by human hands are immanent everywhere in the landscape, producing a powerful sense of a darkly uncertain past and a calamitous future, both of which invade and corrupt the narrator's experience of the present moment. Granted Rousseau's wish of ceasing the wheels turning in his head, Sebald's narrator finds in these circumstances that he has 'not a single thought' (234) in his head, yet this is not the precursor to peace and happiness but to a terrifying nothingness: 'with each step that I took the emptiness within and the emptiness without grew ever greater and the silence more profound' (234).

In his undermining of the image of Rousseau's small island idyll, Sebald gradually demonstrates that such a childhood conceptualisation of a miniature, self-contained home is by its very nature illusory. In the film *Patience (After Sebald),* the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips comments on the Lubow interview, observing,

> I think Sebald knew that only children have homes—that adults don't have homes, […] and I think that dinky little island [Saint-Pierre] which is like a sort of dolls' house island, is a picture of all one's wishful fantasies about home […]. And it's a bit like, this is a toy that he's placed on the map of his books as if to say, wouldn't it be nice if it could ever be like this, but actually it's exactly the opposite. We're not on an island—we're all interconnected and we're interconnected in ways that are horrifying to us very often.

Phillips' observation here resonates with Godfrey Baldacchino and Eric Clark's sense that 'we are all islanders now' (2013: 131). Sebald's Orford Ness is certainly both interconnected and horrifying—it can never be the kind of island Rousseau describes, with its solidity and defined limits—and it constantly undermines the aesthetic and moral ideal

of the notion of the small and self-contained island space. One reason for this is the way in which Sebald refuses to let go of the island's history and its implication, whether directly or by association, in some of the darkest episodes of the 20th century. These episodes include, of course, the Holocaust—a spectre conjured by the description of the showerheads and primitive fittings that litter the Ness landscape: images that inexorably evoke thoughts of the concentration camps of WWII.

Theodor Adorno, identified as 'perhaps [Sebald's] greatest theoretical influence' (Martin 2013: 125), famously made the assertion that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (1997: 34), implying that to participate in the perpetuation of a cultural form in some way validates the culture that has given rise both to that form and to the concentration camps. With Orford Ness we are confronted with a similar feeling: that to recycle uncritically romantic notions of islandness after Auschwitz might be an equally untenable approach, particularly given this particular island's use as a laboratory for war. Thus it is that Sebald's account of this island becomes the inverse of Saint Pierre—an ethical and aesthetic nightmare in which the present moment is unhinged and there is apparently no past to look nostalgically back upon, no future to anticipate with fervent optimism.

However, perhaps the greatest achievement of the Orford Ness passage is the way in which it approaches the horrors of history obliquely. In an interview on the American radio station KCRW carried out a week before Sebald's death, the host Michael Silverblatt questioned the author about certain themes in his writing that are never made explicit yet are powerfully present. He says of Sebald's later work *Austerlitz* that the text seems to have an 'invisible referent', and that, as the narrative progresses, 'the missing term is the concentration camp, and that always circling is this silent presence being left out but always gestured toward. Is that correct?' (2001: n.p.). Sebald responds in the affirmative, elaborating, 'I've always felt that it was necessary above all to write about the history of persecution, of vilification of minorities, the attempt well-nigh achieved to eradicate a whole people' (n.p.), but also suggesting that the horror of this subject is so great that it can only be approached tangentially. He goes on: 'you need to find ways of convincing the reader that this is something that is on your mind […]. The reader needs to be prompted that the narrator has a conscience' (n.p.). Sebald describes this invisible referent as an 'undeclared concern,' (n.p.) giving as a further example a piece of writing by Virginia Woolf, ostensibly about the death of a moth on a window pane in Sussex, but which actually evokes the writer's concerns about the battles of the First World War. The

passage, Sebald suggests, demonstrates that Woolf 'was greatly perturbed by the first world war and by its aftermath, by the damage it did to peoples' souls' (n.p.).

One of the undeclared concerns in the Orford Ness passage certainly seems to be the concentration camp, and by extension the damage done to human souls by war. It is a concern that might be seen as encompassing the global militarism of the 20th century—of which the concentration camps were the nadir—including the Cold War, which is the overt context for Orfordness' particular relationship to militarism. I would suggest, though, that the way in which Sebald makes his tangential approach is integrally bound up with his dialogue with Rousseau's Île Saint-Pierre, and, by extension, with a sense that after Auschwitz, in particular, writing islands must be carried out in a new way. In Sebald's oblique approach to the Holocaust there is a refusal to give it meaning by encoding it within an identifiable aesthetic, or, indeed, by perpetuating any kind of aesthetic at all. Instead the backdrop to the central description of Orford Ness is a condition of silence, emptiness and absence of thought. Silence and a longed-for absence of thought are phenomena that feature in Rousseau's island, where they are figured as benign and restorative. But while Rousseau feels a 'full happiness, which leaves in the soul no void needing to be filled' (2011: 55), or when challenged by the absolute silence, a void dispelled by 'light and pleasant ideas [that] simply brush the surface of the soul' (56), on Orford Ness the silence and emptiness within and without are a prelude to an experience that leaves the narrator apparently paralysed with horror, registering the phenomena he encounters with a sense of utter disorientation that persists long after the event.

Reading the island assemblage: emptiness and affect

This sense of horror and paralysis leaves one wondering what the implications of such a negative response to the landscape might be. One possible answer is that the narrator's state of emptiness represents a precondition for the foregrounding of the traces of destruction in the Ness assemblage. In his essay 'As Day and Night, Chalk and Cheese' Sebald suggests that 'things' have a particular significance. He writes:

> Because (in principle) things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experience they have had with us inside them and are-in fact-the book of our history opened before us. (2004: 79-80)

The 'heaps of scrap metal and defunct machinery' (Sebald 2002c: 237) of the Ness might, then, in Sebald's view, represent some pages from the book of our history. The condition for, and the prelude to, the emergence of this history appears to be a kind of effacement of the narrator's own thought processes and phenomenologies. It is a process reflected in the

style of the writing itself as the description progresses. In the two main pages of the Orford Ness episode (236-237) Sebald's normally digressive, anecdotal style is pared down to a bare listing of the elements of the assemblage. Mary Jacobus's biographical observations on Sebald support this sense of the significance of emptiness. She writes:

> The war crime trials (e.g. the 1963-65 Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt) were the background to his own [Sebald's] coming of age, in the midst of what he calls, retrospectively, a conspiracy of silence. For this reason, he writes, 'I've grown up feeling that there is some sort of emptiness somewhere that needs to be filled by accounts from witnesses one can trust.' These witnesses may be inscriptions, quotations, images, or traces: 'These are different kinds of history lessons. They're not in the history books.' Hence the hybrid, accretive mode of his writing: neither history nor fiction, neither memoir nor entirely invention, but a composite form of witnessing. (2010: 52)

The emptiness of the narrator on Orford Ness—along with the sense of temporal dislocation he experiences as he approaches the Ness—might thus be seen as making space for its 'traces of destruction' to add their bearing witness to the composite narrative of *The Rings of Saturn.*.

This observation perhaps mitigates any sense that in its dialogue with Rousseau's Île Saint-Pierre, the Orford Ness passage is losing contact with the materiality of the island. Even the transposition of images that appear to relate more to the concentration camps of WWII than to the island, has its source in the environment of the Ness.[16] Moreover, the 'traces of destruction' that litter the landscape and speak so powerfully on Orford Ness are there largely *because* the place is an island, perceived, as already noted, as being remote and isolated (notwithstanding its actual geographical location) and therefore ideally suited to secret military weapons testing, and so a reading of their stories is at least in part a reading of the place's naturalcultual islandness. However, that reading is not always straightforward and its meanings are not always immediately self-evident. Josephine Carter comments:

> The disturbing literary effect of these traces is that they appear to be independent of the narrator's narrative; they speak for themselves, but what they say remains uncertain to the narrator and even the reader. (2013: 746)

In an observation that resonates with my assessment in Chapter 1 of Robinson's good step as performative, Carter suggests that Sebald's work is a performance: 'Sebald performs in

[16] A field trip undertaken as part of the research for this chapter, for example, in part to investigate whether there are any actual 'showerheads' in the decaying buildings of the Ness, revealed metal lamp shades the size of diner plates set into pipes that ran along the walls and ceiling in a room adjacent to one of the testing chambers—an image that looked uncannily similar to photographic documentation of the Auschwitz gas chambers.

language the "visceral, affective experience" of being placed in a position of responsibility in relation to the past' (2013: 746). But how is that performance achieved?

Iovino and Oppermann's second approach to material ecocriticism might usefully be brought into play here. As noted in the introduction, they advocate the exploration of 'matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions' (2012: 79). The human, the hare, the tarmac, the grass, the decaying buildings and their fittings, the setting sun, the rising tide, and the humming radio masts of the Orford Ness landscape together comprise a powerful assemblage involving a host of different processes of intra-action. The scene is brimming with the kind of vibrant materiality that Jane Bennett evokes in her delineation of 'thing power' (2010: xvi), with the things all commanding 'attention in [their] own right' (4). As we have seen, each element in the Ness assemblage, including every individual blade of grass, does seem to manifest the ability to command attention, and also, notwithstanding the narrator's apparent blankness, to have, as Carter suggests, a powerful affective impact.

The affective power of the Ness is a feature that Macfarlane identifies in an account of his own visit to the place. His experience is from the beginning influenced and guided by the nature of the things that litter the landscape. 'It is hard to be on the Ness,' he writes,

> and not feel its militarising influence upon one's vision. That day, everything I saw seemed bellicose, mechanised. A hare exploded from a shingle divot. Bramble coiled and looped like barbed wire. Geese landed with their undercarriages down. Green and orange lichen camouflaged the concrete of pillboxes. (2008: 257)

Of course, this can be read as itself something of a literary response to Sebald's Ness, particularly given the echo of Sebald's description of a hare's explosive emergence from its hiding place.[17] Nevertheless, there is a sense in which the island natureculture—the assemblage of disparate phenomena—has a distinctive affective power, an ability to conjure a profound response in the human sensorium. It is also an affective power that, one might argue, is intensified by the qualities of islandness the place seems to possess. As we have seen, early on in his account of the Ness, Sebald notes the ferryman's dark comment that fishermen avoided the island 'because they couldn't stand the god-forsaken loneliness of that outpost in the middle of nowhere, and *in some cases even became emotionally*

[17] Again, both Sebald and Macfarlane are responding to features that really are in evidence on the island. Being startled by hares breaking cover was an experience that punctuated my own visit to the Ness.

disturbed for some time' (2002c: 234, emphasis mine). Likewise, for the reader, there is undoubtedly something disturbing and unsettling about the Orford Ness episode.

The issue of 'affect', however, is one that the new materialists have been reluctant to address, a reluctance explained, at least in part, by the sense that this would involve re-engaging with the question of human subjectivity—a move that might be seen as detracting from their broadly posthumanist remit. Bennett, for example, asks us to:

> Postpone for a while the topics of subjectivity or the nature of human interiority, or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the animal, plant and thing. Sooner or later, these topics will lead down the anthropocentric garden path, will insinuate a hierarchy of subjects over objects, and obstruct freethinking about what agency really entails. (2010: 120)

For Bennett, then, any consideration of the human subject is likely to distract us from the full consideration of material agency. I would suggest, to the contrary, that postponing the subject of human interiority might itself obstruct freethinking about what agency really entails. Kate Soper argues that human understandings of the world will inevitably be 'anthropocentric' in some sense, since 'there is no way of conceiving our relations to it other than through the mediation of ideas about ourselves' (1995: 13). This perception perhaps helps to strengthen the case for an investigation of what might be termed *material affect*: a phenomenon in which human affectivity and subjectivity are conceptualised as arising from an embodied and embedded immersion in a vibrant world of matter.[18]

In fact, recent conceptualisations of affect resonate with aspects of the new materialisms and suggest that the study of matter and affect may share a good deal of common ground. While Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth note, that 'There is no single, generalizable theory of affect' (2010: 3), in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* they offer some broad definitions that characterise affect as intrinsically related to materiality and embodiment. Affect is 'found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds' (1). And, in common with Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's 'choreographies of becoming' (2010: 10) and their account of an ontology in which there is no definitive break between material and spiritual phenomena, Gregg and Seigworth's affective process bridges sensation and sensibility, and can be understood as

> A gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the

[18] See Marland 2014b for an expanded argument for the inclusion of the study of 'material affect' within the remit of material ecocriticism.

> troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to comportments of matter of virtually any and every sort. (2010: 2)

The idea of affect as bodily, contingent, and incremental allows for a sense of human subjectivity as unstable, fluid, and co-constituted by the nonhuman—a perception that may avoid leading us, as Bennett fears, 'down the anthropocentric garden path' (2010: 120). At the same time, though, the study of affect does seem to involve discussion of specifically human subjectivities and perspectives. Gregg and Seigworth draw attention to its role in driving the human towards movement and thought (or conversely suspending that movement and thought), as the repetition of the pronoun 'us' and the anthropomorphising of affect in the following passage demonstrates:

> Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force relations, or that can leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (2010: 1, emphasis in original)

The Orford Ness passage clearly chimes with these accounts of affect. The whole episode is replete with a sense of intensities that pass from body to body and resonances that circulate. The encounter between the human and the hare in the Ness passage establishes a kind of trans-corporeal interchange as they mirror each other's terror and disorientation in an affective intensity that registers viscerally, circulating and co-emerging between the two bodies. When it comes to the collective agencies of the assemblage, Sebald's text shows their affective impact developing incrementally and swarming within the narrator's mind, exceeding the context of their emergence and involving him in imaginative processes that range across past and future timescales. This affective power works, as Gregg and Seigworth suggest, 'beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing' (2010: 1). The passage as a whole is resistant to interpretation and yet, as already noted, the 'primitive contraptions and fittings inside the bunkers, the iron rails under the ceilings, the hooks on the still partially tiled walls, the showerheads the size of plates, the ramps and the soakaways' (Sebald 2002c: 237) inexorably conjure, through the associative memory, images of the Holocaust. In this they call into play the kind of oblique, invisible referent Sebald describes in the Silverblatt interview, and potentially, though never explicitly, bring forth feelings of horror that leave the narrator apparently overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Not only does this suggest a powerful incrementalism to the affective resonance of the things in the landscape, but it can also be seen as corresponding with the way in which Coole and Frost describe 'subjectivities being

constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes' (2010: 10). Part of the ambiguity here is that the stories that matter tells can be tangential, and thus vastly broaden the material frame of reference.

The notion that material things and their co-emerging interactions with the human sensorium might foster such a response renders the elision of the affective dimension from the remit of material ecocriticism problematic. Several of the new materialist theorists move from asserting the vitality of matter to suggesting that the apprehension of this vitality might play into revised 'ethical and political positions' (Alaimo 2008: 238), 'wiser interventions' (Bennett 2010: 4) into the ecology in which we are enmeshed, and a 'material ethics' based on the 'co-extensive materiality' (Iovino 2012: 64) of human and nonhuman. However, it is difficult to imagine quite how these ethical and political aspirations might be prompted and enacted without engaging to some degree with the human subject. As Anna Stenning notes, a potential danger of neo-vitalism is that it might deflect attention from the need for humans to take 'responsibility for our influences on the planet' (2016: 218). Allowing some room for discussion of the human subject in this context, albeit one removed from centre stage, perhaps opens up the possibility of exploring the potential for affect to generate human ethical aspirations. In her essay 'Writing Shame', which discusses the work of T.E. Lawrence and Primo Levi, Elspeth Probyn, while emphasising the bodily impact of affective states, also suggests that 'ideas and writing about shame seek to generate new ways of thinking about how we are related to history and how we wish to live in the present' (2010: 89). While Sebald himself does not explicitly mention shame, he certainly, according to his interview with Lubow, wishes the reader to know that he has a conscience. John Cottingham argues that there is a relationship between conscience, guilt and shame (2013: 729), and that in combination these emotional components of the human psyche might help, in times of moral uncertainty, to 'keep [us] on the right path' (740).

The melancholy island: resistance and remembrance

The power of the Orford Ness assemblage, then, for Sebald, and for a reader alert to its undeclared concern, lies not only in its vitality as a collection of things with ongoing material effects in the environment but also in its affective force, which builds incrementally through the continuum of body/soul, mind/matter, present/past, here/there, powerfully raising questions of 'conscience', and by association, as Carter notes,

responsibility. In a work replete with such moments of affective power, the Orford Ness episode perhaps stands out as manifesting a particular intensity, as the qualities of islandness come to bear on the narrator. We witness a heightened sense of phenomenological experience in his visceral encounter with the hare and the way in which every aspect of the assemblage presses on his attention; an easily breached barrier between self and world in which hare and human become one and in which the human becomes intensely receptive to 'thing power'; and a wholly disorientating fluidity of space-time. But the question perhaps remains as to what these observations might bring to ecocriticism, particularly when it comes to making the apparently awkward leap from the conjuring by the material detritus of the Orford Ness site of images of the Holocaust to more overtly ecological and environmental considerations.

As noted earlier, Anne Fuchs has identified a powerful, social-ecological connection between the two. Discussing Sebald's relationship with the history of European philosophy, and especially the extension of Cartesian dualism which sees animals as mere automata, she states that:

> For Sebald, Descartes's canonical distinction results not only in the disastrously anthropocentric world-view of the modern era but also in the devaluation of the very notion of biological life. […] it is clear that Sebald, like Adorno and Horkheimer before him, makes a connection between European rationalism and the emergence of a biopolitics that made Auschwitz possible. (2007: 125)

Fuchs supports this reading with a discussion of some of the grainy photographs Sebald includes in *The Rings of Saturn*, and the juxtaposition in Part III of an image of the heaped bodies of a glut of herring taken from the North Sea—the result of fishing practices that eventually led to the 'industrial extinction of herring along the North Sea Coast of England' (Kim 2014: 119)—with a photograph of 'the dead corpses of Buchenwald' (Fuchs 2007: 126). Fuchs suggests that 'the common denominator in both stories of destruction [is] a cold and objectified biopolitics which disregards the value of life by means of a reductive interpretation of nature' (126). This juxtaposition is left uncommented upon and unexplained by Sebald, an example of the way in which he approaches the subject of the concentration camp obliquely and tangentially, and one that plays into my reading of the vital role of silence and emptiness in the Orford Ness passage as necessary pre-conditions for allowing 'things' to make their effects/affects felt.

The obliqueness of Sebald's approach is perhaps also indicative of the way in which as already noted, the fact of the Holocaust problematizes post-war cultural production more generally. Mary Cosgrove, in her discussion of Adorno's assertion, cited

above, that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric' (Adorno 1997: 34), states that this dictum 'was not intended to establish a prohibition on artistic representation' (Cosgrove 2014: 2). She goes on,

> Rather than asserting that the impossibility of representation was a problem immanent to the postwar work of art and therefore inescapable, Adorno addressed the 'unknowability' of the Holocaust as an *epistemological* problem that post-Auschwitz literary writing should aporetically reflect. In other words, the language of the postwar text should thematise its limitations. (2, emphasis in original)

In many ways this is what Sebald *does* do with the language of the Orford Ness passage. The absence of thoughts in the narrator's head is compounded by silence and emptiness, resulting in his overtly blank recording of the 'things' he finds in the landscape and his utter bewilderment at the enigma of the beings who formerly populated the site. His apparent confusion over the purpose of their fixtures and fittings conjures a sense of unknowablity and conceptual impasse.

Cosgrove's interpretation of Adorno is persuasive, but perhaps begs the question of how art might, then, do anything other than reflect, and reflect upon, its limitations, in the face of such unknowability. In fact, for Cosgrove, this epistemological and representational problem offers the opportunity for renewed creativity, and in *Born Under Auschwitz: Melancholy Traditions in Postwar German Literature* she identifies the trope of melancholy as a key feature of such creative engagements. Following Cosgrove's lead I would contend that the sense of melancholy that suffuses the whole of *The Rings of Saturn,* but arguably reaches its greatest intensity on the almost-island of Orford Ness, has a creative role to play in finding a way through this aporia. At the same time I believe it highlights the comparable epistemological problem identified in the human relationship with the more-than-human world and the difficulty of representing the effects and affects of ecological destruction.

In his essay 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud differentiates between these two psychological conditions in the following terms:

> Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on. In some people the same influences produce melancholia instead of mourning and we consequently suspect them of a pathological disposition. (2001: 243)

He sees mourning as carrying out the 'work' (244) of acknowledging that the lost object no longer exists. Melancholia, by contrast, represents an inability to go through the healthy stages of grieving—the 'normal affect of mourning' (243)—resulting in a pathological

condition which leads, among other symptoms, to the 'inhibition of all activity' (244) and to a narcissistic state in which the ego becomes 'poor and empty' (246). According to David Kaufmann, this kind of melancholy is often regarded in broader psychological discourse as 'sadness without a cause' (2008: 94-5). As noted in the introduction, 'melancholy' has been identified as a key feature of Sebald's writing, and, by extension, of his world view, with a significant body of critical work now focused on this theme. However, there is some debate about the nature and function of this melancholy.

For some readers of his work, Sebald's melancholy seems 'pathological' in exactly the terms laid out in Freud's essay. In *Austerlitz and After,* Iain Sinclair confesses that his

> sense of the Sebaldian voyage was of a man who is not quite well, walking through a landscape of coincidences and elective affinities in search of a sepia photograph of a discontinued self. (2013: 18)

This summation immediately brings out the themes of illness, narcissism and damage to the ego associated with Freudian melancholia. However, it seems that Sebald's own view of melancholy did not entirely coincide with Freud's, or with its interpretation in prevailing psychological discourse. In the essay 'Constructs of Mourning: Günter Grass and Wolfgang Hildesheimer', he blurs the distinction between melancholy and mourning. Discussing Alexander and Margarete Mitserlich's theory of 'the inability to mourn', formulated in 1967, he suggests that in the cultural elision of the trauma of the Second World War and in the establishment of the 'inept institutions' (2006: 103) of organized collective mourning, National Remembrance Day and German Unity Day, 'the Germans had managed to avoid a phase of collective melancholy […] instead bringing their psychological energies to bear 'on resisting the experience of a melancholy impoverishment of the self' (103). Here melancholy, even—or perhaps, especially—accompanied by an impoverishment of the self, is seen as having an important role to play in the negotiation of trauma and guilt: in other words, as carrying out essential *work,* just as mourning does. Thus, for Sebald, it was to the detriment of the German people that both melancholy *and* more organic mourning were, in effect, supressed. And, as already noted, Sebald explicitly asserts, in the Preface to *Die Beschriebung des Unglücks* that melancholy is 'eine Form des Widerstands'—a form of resistance (1985: 12).

In fact, Kaufmann also notes the existence of more positive interpretations of melancholy in psychanalytic theory:

> It is also a commonplace of this discourse that melancholy entails something more than a mere pathology. It voices wisdom. It expresses both an accurate understanding of the world and a protest against its ways. (2008: 95)

Referring to *Die Beschriebung des Unglücks*, and citing Sigrid Löffler, Kaufmann states: 'This notion underwrites Sebald's claim […] that the melancholic contemplation of disaster embodies a form of resistance to injustice' (2008: 95). However, having weighed both sides of the argument—melancholy as pathology versus melancholy as resistance—he finally concludes that 'the melancholic is in constant danger of becoming enthralled by his or her own projections' (2008: 115).[19] He argues that 'Sebald falls into this melancholy trap' (116), and that it

> leads him to the conclusion that the catastrophes of the past serve as proof of the inevitability of disaster. It turns those catastrophes into objects of a pained, painful, and impotent contemplation and it can only recognize the world as a reflection of its own deepest despair. (116)

Kaufmann is not the only critic to identify in Sebald's work a tendency to represent places in a manner that reflects his own personal feelings. Simon Ward argues, for example, that Sebald is very much 'projecting' himself onto the account of Orford Ness (2004: 60-61), particularly in the way in which the narrator figure imposes his imagined past and apocalyptic future scenarios onto the landscape. Gregory-Guider also suggests that places, and by extension the places in Sebald's work, are 'largely constructed by our individual (and culturally based) desires, fears and memories' (2005: 423). Even readings that avoid interpreting Sebald's landscapes as personal projections have often revolved around debates over whether his work can be read as 'an allegorical expression of an apocalyptic vision of history in the vein of Walter Benjamin' (Fuchs 2007: 122)—in other words, as informed by a vision, like that of Benjamin's angel of history, of the past as 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage' (Benjamin 2003: 392).

There are certainly elements of the Orford Ness passage that support such readings, and I am neither suggesting that Sebald's Orford Ness is not in some way a construction, nor that it is untouched by the sweeping sense of destruction of Benjamin's angel. And Sebald certainly does not provide the definitive response to that landscape. Luke Bennett's work on 'bunkerology' for example explores a range of reactions to the existence of Cold War bunkers (including the Pagodas of Orford Ness), including ones of positive veneration (Bennett 2011; 2013). Sebald's narrator figure has shown himself from the beginning of *The Rings of Saturn* to be of a melancholic nature and susceptible to 'ailments of the spirit'

[19] An observation that might equally be applied to Brenda Chamberlain, in her evocation of Bardsey island.

(2002c: 2), speaking of his hospitalisation a year after the beginning of the walking tour because of a state of 'almost total immobility' (2) brought on by the 'paralysing horror' (2) that came over him when confronted by the 'traces of destruction' (2) he finds in the landscape. And, as already noted, this horror and these traces of destruction appear to be intensified when the narrator reaches Orford Ness. He draws our attention to the damaging effects of the place (for example, fishermen left 'emotionally disturbed' (234) after going night-fishing there), and his own confused state, in which he feels 'both utterly liberated and deeply despondent' (234). All of these elements lend weight to the argument that he is perhaps an unreliable observer, already predisposed to find the place dispiriting. However, the material ecocritical reading that forms the second strand of this chapter and highlights the vitality of the 'traces of horror' found on Orford Ness, perhaps mitigates some of the sense that Sebald is merely 'binding' his own pathology to the traumas of the twentieth century, projecting his own personal sense of despair onto the landscape, or imbuing the scene with a kind of apocalyptic inevitability.

There are ways, I would argue, in which Sebald's deliberate evocation of melancholy can be viewed in a more positive, creative light, and as being particularly relevant for ecocritical thought. Fuchs, for example, sees his melancholy-infused landscapes as revealing, rather, 'a sophisticated and complex response to the modern concept of nature and the complementary notion of an idealised landscape' (2007: 122). Cosgrove argues in relation to *The Rings of Saturn* that 'melancholy's many symbols lend themselves generically to the representation of the complex interaction between the natural and human worlds and so it is a suitable carrier for the literary expression of ecological concerns' (2007: 99). Goodbody also gives a more complex reading of Sebald's melancholy. He writes:

> To assume Sebald was a nihilist would, however, be mistaken. For if his works are to be judged by whether they promote reflection on our place in nature and our relationship with the natural environment, or even by whether they motivate and empower readers to action in pursuit of a more sustainable and just society, we must ask ourselves whether his apocalyptically inflected melancholy is not an aesthetic strategy designed to challenge and provoke readers. (2013: 349)

Given this notion of deliberate provocation, it is worth looking in more detail at the nature of Sebald's melancholy 'resistance' as evidenced by the Orford Ness passage, and at the function it might serve in the text. As noted above, Cosgrove identifies the trope of melancholy as a highly creative device in post-war German literature. She also locates it as an important feature of Sebald's writing, arguing that its complexity in his work should be

reflected in a discussion of 'melancholies' rather than 'melancholy', 'because he […] adapts and combines several discursive traditions' (2014: 145). These discursive traditions might be seen as including, as I have already suggested, the trope of the *ubi sunt* and the narrative of the island idyll. Cosgrove herself links the melancholy of the Orford Ness episode to a sentiment she finds to be the narrator's consistent message: 'humankind in the modern era cannot seem to control its destructive instinct' (164).

While Orford Ness—with its military history, the material effects and affects of its assemblage of rusting contraptions, and the way in which it confounds Rousseau's construction of the small island as home—brings into play complex forms of melancholy and reflects a powerful sense of destruction, this destruction is not necessarily seen as an inevitable feature of a world in which nothing can be done to halt the piling of wreckage upon wreckage. Sontag writes, 'Sebald was not just an elegist, he was a militant elegist. Remembering, he wanted the reader to remember, too' (2004: 89), and in the Orford Ness passage there seems to be a range of subjects—historical, social and ecological—that Sebald is not ready to let us forget, thus instigating a process of remembering that may carry with it the hope of change. One might argue, additionally, that it is a dimension of the Ness's islandness and its own resistance to cultural encapsulation that fosters this potential for remembering.

From this perspective, then, Sebald's narrator might be considered as carrying out the work of melancholy and militant remembrance. This work comes at a cost, though. 'Memory and the passing on of the objective information it retains must be delegated to those who are ready to live with the risk of remembering', Sebald writes in 'Between History and Natural History: On the literary description of total destruction' (2006: 86-7). The experience leaves him/ the narrator, as we have seen, paralysed by horror, or by, in Gregg and Seigworth's phrase, the world's intractability. But in performing this act of melancholy resistance—and in the way in which he allows the material elements of the Ness to speak their own history through the overtly blank, ego-less receptacle of the narrator—Sebald throws down a challenge to the reader to themselves take up the work of melancholy and to live with the risk of remembering. Jacobus notes that 'translation becomes a form of recovered memory' (2010: 40) and that Sebald was 'a writer-in-exile who would not, however, translate himself, preferring to write in his native language, in a kind of superimposed linguistic exile' (40). Reading, even in one's own language, is a form of translation and of the recovering of memory of various kinds. The narrative of *The Rings of Saturn*, recounted as it is in the words of a semi-fictionalised narrator and already

translated from one language to another, presents something of a deliberate challenge to the reader actively to continue this work of remembering, a task Sebald's evocation of Orford Ness focuses particularly acutely.

That said, there still remains a question over what might be achieved through such remembering. Perhaps the first response to this is to suggest that by *failing* to remember we open the door to the repetition of such acts—whether they are the horrors of the Holocaust, or forms of ecological destruction. For a species that can carry out the 'attempt well-nigh achieved to eradicate a whole people' (Sebald 2001: n.p.) or wage war on a world scale, the domination of nature even to the brink of ecocide and beyond is entirely possible. It implies a necessity to remember and mourn fully and properly for what has gone before—for the damaged places and the victims and the damaged souls—in order to attempt to avoid the continuation of such destruction. For Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, when it comes to environmental losses, such mourning is essential to avoid being subsumed into what Kaufmann calls 'the ideological hollowness of modern celebrations of progress' (2008: 116).

Mortimer-Sandilands suggests that 'there is in late-capitalist nature relations a patina of nature-*nostalgia* in place of any kind of active negotiation of environmental mourning' (2010: 332-3). Initially she seems to frame melancholy as implicit in this nostalgia. She goes on,

> In late capitalism, I would argue, nature-nostalgia—ecotourist pilgrimages to endangered wildernesses, documentaries of dying peoples and places, even environmentalist campaigns to 'save' particular habitats or species against the onslaught of development—are exactly a form of melancholy nature, in that they incorporate environmental destruction into the ongoing workings of commodity capitalism. (333)

These 'incorporations' typically result in the kind of 'romantic portrayals of loss or salvation emphasized in contemporary environmental spectacle' (334). However, she then outlines a different form of melancholy—one that resonates strongly with Sebald's melancholy resistance. She reframes melancholy from a queer perspective, citing Judith Butler and arguing that queer melancholia

> in the midst of a homophobic culture that barely tolerates, let alone values, homosexual attachments—is focused exactly on the condition of grieving the ungrievable: how does one mourn in the midst of a culture that finds it almost impossible to recognize the value of what has been lost? (333)

In this context melancholia is not a failed or inadequate mourning, but a means of refusing to let what has been lost go unacknowledged, understanding that it is a loss 'whose ghost propels a *changed* understanding of the present' (333, emphasis in original).

Applying this perspective to environmental issues—an area whose value Western culture perhaps finds similarly hard to recognise, Mortimer-Sandilands asks:

> What would it mean to consider seriously the environmental present, in explicit contrast to dominant discourses of ecological modernization, as a pile of environmental wreckage, constituted and haunted by multiple, personal and deeply traumatic losses rather than as a position from which to celebrate their demise by consuming them (and moving on to something else)? (2010: 342)

This passage reads almost as a description of the Orford Ness episode, with its social ecological intertwinings, sense of horror, and paralyzing affects. The Ness, for Sebald's narrator, is exactly such a pile of wreckage, haunted by trauma and numberless ghosts. His bleak description of the place represents a refusal to move on while society continues with its almost wilful failure to recognise the significance of historical and environmental trauma, and its reluctance to engage in processes of both individual and collective melancholy and mourning. It implies an augmented understanding of islandness, one that extends the powerful sense of archipelagic interconnectedness that we have learned from island studies to a damning social-ecological critique of 20th century humanity and politics.

To bring out this point further, I now compare Sebald's account of the Ness with a 2013 episode of the British wildlife documentary programme, *Springwatch*, set on the island. The tenor of the narrative here is a celebration of the re-encroachment of 'nature' on the site. The military history of the Ness is outlined, with the presenter talking of the site's involvement in design and engineering, and of the nuclear bombs 'that were born here' but whose threat has now dissipated: 'Tested, stressed, pushed and pounded, designing the end of the world—now they've gone. The buildings fade into the land, replaced by nature and its accidental designs of evolution'. The commentary seems to diminish any sense of human responsibility. The idea of bombs being 'born' on the site has the effect of naturalising their existence, drawing our attention away from the fact of the 'boffins' Sebald describes as being engaged in their creation. The description concludes:

> so many new and different lives in a landscape that plotted to take life away. Just as nature is rising here so the buildings of Orford Ness are falling […] leaving a question for our nation. Renovate this unique landscape - an emblem of British design - or forget it? Allow continued ruination, a redesign by nature.

The apparent complacency of this statement and the manipulation of its grammatical subject speak volumes. The *landscape* plotted to take life away, but the

apocalypse never happened and so the necessity of exploring the species that actually made the plans for the end of the world has dissipated. The sinister buildings and contraptions of Sebald's Ness are neutralised, either to be renovated as an (apparently positive) emblem of design, or left to material processes of decay, in a narrative in which the trope of the natural island idyll can be seen subtly re-insinuating itself. Once again, in this rhetoric of 'moving on', 'the ideological hollowness of modern celebrations of progress' (Kaufmann 2008: 116) is revealed, and the programme as a whole seems to reflect very closely Mortimer-Sandilands sense of the 'romantic portrayals of loss or salvation emphasized in contemporary environmental spectacle' (2010: 334).

To some, this optimism may seem a positive development, particularly in the context of environmentalism, which sometimes suffers from an almost crippling sense of doom. Timothy Morton states:

> Environmentalism is often apocalyptic. It warns of, and wards off, the end of the world. […] But things aren't like that: the end of the world has already happened. We sprayed the DDT. We exploded the nuclear bombs. We changed the climate. This is what it looks like after the end of the world. Today is not the end of history. We're living at the beginning of history. (2010: 98)

For Morton, the end of the world has already happened and we must think forward from this point. He asks in the Introduction to *The Ecological Thought* 'How do we move forward from the melancholy of a poisoned planet?' (2010: 2). But for Sebald, past and future co-exist. We live in the midst of the flow of history backwards and forwards, and the potential apocalypse—the 'future catastrophe' (Sebald 2002c: 237)—symbolised by the contraptions at Orford Ness remains a possibility at all times. His melancholy resists the notion that we can move forward until we have properly recognised what has been done and what has been lost.

The island itself helps to foster Sebald's melancholy resistance. The traces of destruction found on the Ness interact with the sensibility of the narrator with powerful 'affect', making their presence felt and hinting at the histories in which they participate and which Sebald is determined to remember. Moreover, there is a sense in which the island is itself resistant—even to Sebald's own reading— such that, as we have seen, there seems to be a change of aspect at the end of the Orford Ness passage. In a short film made for *The Guardian* Macfarlane expresses some of his sense of fascination with the Ness. He says: 'Everything is fissile, everything gives way when you try and touch it, whether in terms of knowledge or in terms of the shingle underfoot' (2012b). Given this porous,

shifting quality it is perhaps no surprise that the meanings of the island are difficult to fix. Macfarlane goes on:

> When I first started writing about the Ness I spent too long trying to make it make sense, trying to force it into a kind of order and compel it to yield secrets and sense to me, and I now realise that what is far more interesting is letting it suggest its own text and metaphors. (2012b)

The sentence that concludes the whole of Sebald's Orford Ness episode finds the narrator afforded a glimpse of the windmills of the past still turning in the setting sun, and hints that the island is indeed resisting Sebald's reading and suggesting its own further metaphors. Elsewhere in *The Rings of Saturn* windmills feature in a description of the town of Dunwich, north of Orford, where they figure as an aspect of the town's flourishing status in the Middle Ages. Now, with many other buildings of that medieval settlement, they have been lost through the erosion of the east coast: 'All of it has gone under, quite literally, and is now below the sea, beneath alluvial sand and gravel' (2002c: 155). Their imaginative re-emergence here, in the final sentence of the episode, perhaps mitigates some of the negative force of the inverse *ubi sunt* discussed in the first strand of the chapter. Without diminishing the impact of what has gone before, it hints that, though the journey of Sebald's narrator ends in paralysis and breakdown, the vision of the long-vanished windmills with their heavy sails turning in the sunset—symbols of a more benign use of the landscape—perhaps offers a glimmer of hope.

This hope may be one that attaches to both social and ecological futures. Jo Catling, the translator of *Die Beschriebung des Unglucks* and *Unheimliche Heimat,* due for publication in 2016, has begun sketching out a version of the sentences that precede the melancholy resistance passage. These lines bring to the fore the idea that 'nature' is as much in Sebald's mind as forms of humanitarian conscience:

> Authors like Grillparzer, Stifter, Hofmannsthal, Kafka and Bernhard clearly see progress as a [literally] loss-making business, but it would be mistaken to see this as a political or moral view. Kafka's view that all our inventions are made just before we crash [implication: when it's already too late?] is not so easily dismissed. The gradual destruction (extinction) of nature—which is what keeps us alive—is the ever more obvious proof/ correlative. (square brackets in original)[20]

For Sebald, then, it is important to see through the myth of progress, because in its wake lies not only the Holocaust but also the gradual destruction, even to the point of extinction, of the nature that keeps us alive. Markus Zisselsberger, in his essay 'Melancholy Longings: Sebald, Benjamin, and the Image of Kafka', also comments on Sebald's

[20] Translation received in an email from Jo Catling, 16/2/15, and quoted with permission.

assertion of the resistance of melancholy, and suggests that Sebald believed that this resistance might offer the prospect of a more positive future:

> 'Melancholy,' he writes, 'is the rethinking of a calamity in progress, but has nothing in common with a desire for death [Sebald is referring here to Freud's later linking of melancholia with the death drive]. It is a form of resistance.' Melancholy as a form of sustained reflection on our calamity inevitably leads to the path of writing, to 'the description of calamity,' which, Sebald insists, always 'entails the possibility of overcoming the latter'. (2007: 296-7)

Thus, through the sustained reflection involved in states of melancholy remembrance of calamity, and through the path of writing that Sebald takes, the possibility is kept alive that we might yet rethink the calamity in progress.

Conclusion

The findings of this chapter have revealed, in every aspect of Sebald's account of the almost-island of Orford Ness, a sense of resistance: resistance to romantic discourses of landscape, and in particular to the trope of the island idyll; resistance to forgetting the histories that are written into the landscape and that, if allowed to speak for themselves, resonate through the human sensorium; and a profoundly melancholic resistance to participation in the rhetoric of the progress of civilisation. These features have been intensified, I have argued, by Orford Ness's own qualities: by its 'extra-territorial' status; the destabilising, shifting and porous nature of its geology; by the fluidity of its space-time; by the way in which its landscape encourages a sense of the porousness of the barriers between self and world; and by its powerful materialisation as an island assemblage. I have put forward the notion of the Ness as the inverse of the Romantic island, proposed the addition of *material affect* to the area of study encompassed by material ecocriticism, and combined Carter's notion of Sebald's performative melancholy with Mortimer-Sandilands' social-ecologically inflected queer melancholy in order to give an ecological reading of Sebald's aporetic, post-Auschwitz account of the island.

Overall, Sebald's rupture of the romantic discourses of the island, along with his oblique and tangential approach to the horrors of the past and his performative melancholy resistance to forgetting those horrors, might be seen as potentially enabling us, as I have suggested above, to rethink the calamities in progress—both social and environmental—and in that rethinking to keep alive the possibility of overcoming those calamities. This is perhaps what an ecocritical reading might take from the Orford Ness episode, and from Sebald's reworking of 'islandness'. By insisting on the need to keep reading the open book

of our history that material things set before us, and to keep remembering the insufficient forms of humanity in which we are all archipelagically implicated, the work of melancholy Sebald carries out here might foster a form of sustained reflection on the past and a refusal to forget or to be subsumed into discourses of social or environmental progress. Sebald's melancholy island, perhaps counter-intuitively, provides us with an opportunity to keep asking the pressing question of how we want to live now.

Chapter 4

Islands at the edge of the world: from the Stone Age to the Age of Satellites

The inhabitants of St Kilda take their measures from the flight of those fowls, when the heavens are not clear, as from a sure compass.
–Martin Martin, *A Late Voyage to St Kilda.*

The wind and sea. Everything else is provisional. A wing's beat and it's gone.
–Kathleen Jamie, 'Wind'

I saw two shooting stars last night
I wished on them but they were only satellites
–Billy Bragg, 'A New England'

Introduction: the outliers of the Outer Hebrides

Chapters 1 and 2 took as their subjects islands situated relatively near to mainland land masses; islands that, despite fluctuations in their population numbers, continue to support human habitation to this day. The chapters outlined the way in which these islands offered distinctive forms of islandness, as well as providing rich sites for the reassessment of ecocritical formulations of human being-in-the-world. They represented, in the case of Árainn, '*the* exemplary terrain' (Robinson 2008: 20, emphasis in original) for an investigation, via the good step, of the construct of dwelling, and, in the case of Bardsey, an apparently ideal site for exploring human imbrication in a world of vital matter. The tensions that emerged in Chapter 2 between Christine Evans' powerful sense of phenomenological immersion and Brenda Chamberlain's more troubled response to the island's complex natureculture—the sometimes problematic interplay between material 'choreographies' and culturally-inflected 'chorographies'—set the scene for Chapter 3's further investigation of human-material entanglement. This chapter focused on the representation in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn* of the almost-island of Orford Ness, and discussed the way in which the response of the narrator-figure to the island assemblage brought to the fore questions of affect and melancholy, establishing a sense both of Sebald's resistance to Rousseauian romantic discourses of islandness, and of the island's own forms of resistance to any one particular interpretation.

This, the final chapter of the thesis, travels to a collection of 'uninhabited' islands that lie at the edges of the Outer Hebridean archipelago, off the west coast of Scotland: the Shiants, to the east of Harris; the Monach islands, to the west of North Uist; and, further out in the North Atlantic, the 'fabled outliers' (Jamie 2012: 158)—the St Kilda

archipelago, forty miles west northwest of North Uist, and the islands of Rona[1] and Sula Sgeir, separated by 11 miles and lying over forty miles north northeast of Butt of Lewis. The chapter draws principally on four 21st century non-fiction works that fall broadly into the categories of travel writing and new nature writing. These are: *Sea Room* (2001), Adam Nicolson's love letter to the Shiants; Robert Macfarlane's *The Old Ways* (2012a), an extended section of which details his experiences in the Scottish Western Isles; and Kathleen Jamie's two prose essay collections, *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012). While Jamie's works range over diverse terrains and locations, some of which are urban, some of which broach the 'nature' inside human bodies, the pull of islands is a recurring theme, and it is in Jamie's work that some of the most distinctive and unexpected forms of islandness come to light. These forms, as I argue, have a bearing on the ensuing discussion of the application on these islands of sophisticated forms of modern technology, and, by association, of possible techno-posthumanist perspectives in ecocriticism. For this reason, there is more discussion of Jamie's work in the chapter than that of Nicolson and Macfarlane. The primary material has been augmented by interviews with Macfarlane and Jamie.

It is possible to consider these islands as an archipelagic group both because of their Outer Hebridean location (though some are more far-flung than others), and through a range of characteristics they share. Although all of these small islands, with the exception of Sula Sgeir, are known to have supported human populations for thousands of years, it was an inhabitation that came to an end in the final centuries of the second millennium, when new ways of living and the development of new technologies made traditional island lifestyles seem catastrophically outmoded. Around the year 1680 voyagers shipwrecked on Rona made the grisly discovery that the entire population had perished, and though attempts were made subsequently to repopulate the island, the last family left in 1844 (Jamie 2006: n.p.); the Shiants were finally abandoned around 1901 (Nicolson 2001: 12); the remaining inhabitants of St Kilda were famously evacuated from the island at their own request in 1930 (Maclean 1996: 156); and the last crofters left the Monachs during the 1940s (Jamie 2005: 65). Though the islands have continued to be mapped, studied, and used for varying purposes (meteorological and military, for example), they are no longer home to traditional subsistence communities. At the same time, these islands are generally, as Nicolson says of the Shiants, 'the hub for millions of

[1] Sometimes called North Rona, to differentiate it from South Rona in the Inner Hebrides.

bird and animal lives' (2001: 13). One quarter of the world's gannets live on the outliers of the Outer Hebrides,[2] as well as significant numbers of puffins, Leach's storm petrels, fulmars, great skuas, and other relatively rare birds, and the marine environment around the islands is rich in numerous species of fish, seals, sharks and whales.[3]

Even before the departure of the human populations the islands seemed to encourage extended reflection on more-than-human nature. Martin Martin, writing in 1698 of the ease with which the St Kildan islanders harvested the solan geese (gannets), observes that

> so powerful is that *στοργή* or natural affection for their offspring, that they choose rather to die upon the egg, or fowl, than escape with their own lives, (which they could do in a minute) and leave either of these to be destroyed. (1999 [1698]: 259)

In the apparent force of *storge* (a Greek term for natural affection or familial love) in the gannets he finds a lesson for humanity:

> It deserves our consideration to reflect seriously upon the natural propensity and sagacity of these animals in their kind; which if compared with many rational creatures, do far outstrip them, and justly obey the prescript of their natures, by living up unto that instinct that Providence has given them. (259)

While somewhat anthropomorphic in its sentiment, this passage nevertheless reveals, in its recognition of the birds' 'sagacity', a perhaps unexpected willingness to admire animal behaviour. It allows the gannets a degree of subjectivity if not rationality, and exhibits a degree of humility in the face of the more-than-human. This recognition of animal abilities is a phenomenon that resurfaces in the contemporary literature studied in this chapter, striking us with perhaps even greater force in the light of current posthumanist scrutiny of natural 'prescripts' of all kinds.

These islands are also linked to each other by 'sea-roads'—*astar mara* in Gaelic and *veger* in Old Norse—'up and down which people, goods, gods, ideas and stories have moved for nearly ten millennia' (Macfarlane 2012a: 87). Macfarlane stresses the aquapelagic importance of these routes:

> What you should first realize, to understand the sea-roads, is how close the ocean brings far-apart places. In a pre-modern world, before cars and planes, the boat was the fastest means of long-distance travel. (89)

[2] St Kilda/The National Trust for Scotland website.

[3] In the case of St Kilda this dual richness has been recognised in its designation as 'one of only two-dozen global locations to be awarded World Heritage Status for both natural and cultural significance' (St Kilda / The National Trust for Scotland website: n.p.).

In fact, it is only relatively recently that we have begun to understand how significant these sea roads were, historically. Macfarlane continues, 'The existence of the ancient seaways, and their crucial role in shaping prehistory, were only recognised in the early twentieth century' (89-90). However, as he also notes, these sea roads were not only travelled by humans: Old English kennings[4] such as 'the *hwael-weg* (the whale's way), [and] the *swan-rād* (the swan's way)' (88), used to describe the sea, lend weight to the suggestion that it might have been the aquapelagic and aeronautical paths of nonhuman creatures that first showed human travellers the way. This is certainly a perception that occurs to Nicolson: writing about the Celtic hermits who travelled the North Atlantic between the sixth and tenth centuries, he asks: 'Is it possible that they, in search of "a desert in the ocean", followed the track the geese had blazed for them?' (2001: 134).

Martin gives a more concrete example of this kind of pathfinding-by-seabird when he describes the way in which his crew, having lost their bearings in rough weather during a voyage to St Kilda, navigate their route by following the flight of seabirds. He adds, 'The inhabitants of St Kilda take their measures from the flight of those fowls, when the heavens are not clear, as from a sure compass' (1999 [1698]: 239).[5] The traditions of the islands, then, seem to reflect a well-founded ability to read and to fathom what might now be thought of as aspects of biosemiosis: the 'signs, meanings and purposes' (Wheeler 2011: 279) of the island world. The movements of birds also provide pathways between the texts studied in this chapter and the earlier chapters in the thesis. Nicolson's description of the migratory passage of Barnacle geese sees them tracing an arc that takes in the Irish Aran islands of Chapter 1, the islands featured in this chapter and places far beyond, as

[4] Commentaries on the use of kennings in Old English poetry have considered them to be a form of 'peculiar metaphorical expression', often coined 'in order to satisfy the requirements of verse structure and alliteration, and also as devices of style' (Godden and Lapidge 2000: 38). Arthur Brodeur distinguishes between different kinds of compound nouns, adopting Andreas Heusler's restricted notion of a kenning as featuring 'periphrastic appellations in the base-word of which a person or thing is identified with something which it actually is *not*, except in a very special or artificial sense' (Brodeur 1959: 18, emphasis in original), but he augments this definition with his concept of the *kent heiti* (a term derived from Old Norse) 'for those more direct periphrases which identify the referent with something that it *is*' (18). The notion that medieval human voyagers might really have attempted to follow the routes of seabirds and marine mammals certainly leaves those compound nouns with some residual literal force, and suggests that they might be, like some of the figurative language discussed in Chapter 2, 'more-than-metaphorical' in their conception and function.

[5] Similarly, the Reverend Kenneth McAuley, writing in 1765, adds the divination of the weather to the skills gained by observing the island creatures:

> The islanders in general possess the art of predicting the changes of the weather perhaps in much greater perfection than many of those who are beyond doubt superior to them in some other branches of knowledge… The St Kildans owe much of their knowledge to the observations they and their predecessors have made on the screamings, flight, and other motions of birds and more especially on their migrations from one place to another. (McAuley, cited in Steel 1994 [1975]: 30, ellipsis in original)

they go 'from the west coast of Ireland, across to the Inner Hebrides, up past the Shiants to Rona and Sula Sgeir, on to the Faeroes, Iceland and Greenland' (2001: 134). These reflections, both historical and contemporary, cumulatively point to a particular feature of these islands that I return to later in the chapter, which is that of bringing the qualities of nonhuman animals to the forefront of our attention. It also highlights the perhaps unexpected ecological, archipelagic, and aquapelagic intersections of the local and the global in these 'remote' islands. In a poignant image of interconnection, Nicolson observes that the route of the geese is 'a line creased into the palm of the world's hand' (134).

The islands are not only linked through human and nonhuman wayfaring and settlement, but also share a status as the objects of an enduring cultural fascination. Martin's essay *A Late Voyage to St Kilda,* cited above, was published in 1698, followed by his 1703 *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*. These works influenced Boswell and Johnson's *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland,* published in 1775, and Boswell's 1785 *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D*. The outliers of the Outer Hebrides feature in the 20th century travel writing of Frank Fraser Darling and Robert Atkinson, among others—accounts that have added to their allure for contemporary travellers. The St Kilda archipelago has been a particular focus, with the evacuation of Hirta[6] in 1930 catching the public imagination powerfully, and inspiring Michael Powell's 1937 film *The Edge of the World*. In the 1970s and 80s Mary Harman carried out pioneering attempts to compile a complete survey of the anthropological history of the archipelago. The work was finally published in 1997 as *An Isle Called Hirte*.[7]

The writers studied in this chapter all make reference to these earlier texts: references that not only locate them in a tradition of island writers, but also, perhaps, alert us once again to the truth of Edna Longley's assertion that island literature is always heavily 'pre-troped' (2010: 144). Nicolson provides an extensive bibliography with *Sea Room* that includes, among many others, Martin, Johnson, Atkinson, Fraser Darling, and Harman; Macfarlane also gives us a bibliography of books that have informed the creation of *The Old Ways,* which includes works by Fraser Darling and Nicolson himself; and Jamie dedicates *Sightlines* to 'the island-goers' (a reference, identified by Jamie (2014

[6] Hirta (sometimes written as Hirte, Hiort, or Hirt), is the Gaelic name for the whole St Kilda archipelago, but is also the name given to its largest island and main site of its human habitation.

[7] Harman herself notes the already vast literature of St Kilda at this point, which includes 'no less than twenty books of a general nature, nine devoted to particular aspects of the islands, four novels, innumerable articles in newspapers, in academic and popular journals, and a number of unpublished accounts' (1997: 1-2).

n.p.), to *Island Going*, Atkinson's account of his travels to the outliers of the Outer Hebrides, first published in 1949), and discusses Mary Harman's research. At the heart of *Sightlines* is a tripartite essay, 'Three Ways of Looking at St Kilda', which documents Jamie's attempts to reach the archipelago, as well as her eventual experiences on the islands. In its form this piece is perhaps also a nod to Martin's three-part account of his own visit to the islands in *A Late Voyage to St Kilda* (1698).

These islands are also temporal frontiers, in which time manifests itself at some points as a many-stranded concurrence of timescales—a phenomenon we have seen in previous chapters—and at others as a collision between the ancient and the hyper-modern. Hamish Haswell-Smith calls St Kilda 'a Stone Age landscape in the modern age' (2008: xiv), an observation echoed by Jamie's description of Hirta as a place in which you move 'between the Stone Age and the Age of Satellites' (2012: 158). The Stone Age is represented on the islands by the ruins of dwellings and the relics of ways of life that had probably changed very little between the time of the first human inhabitation and the point at which the islands were finally deserted. In St Kilda's case, as Jamie points out, only thirty years after the demise of this Stone Age style of being-human-in-the-world, 'Telstar was launched' (2012: 159). With this observation comes the corresponding and unsettling sense that the human has since then been changing at an unprecedented pace. In terms of St Kilda's more-than-human population, scientists have mapped what also appear to be relatively rapid developments. The St Kildan islands are thought of by biologists and zoologists as the Galapagos of the UK (*Hebrides: Islands on the Edge* 2013: n.p.), since they are one of the few places in the British Isles where the genetic isolation of various species means that their evolution can be closely monitored. The archipelago is home to three unique sub-species—the St Kilda wren, the St Kilda field mouse and a strain of now wild Soay sheep—all witnessing accelerated forms of change (*Hebrides: Islands on the Edge* 2013; Connor 2009).[8] Thus, these little islands, which take much of their naturalcultural character from traditions so ancient as to appear timeless, have the paradoxical quality of orienting us inexorably towards the future.

The forms of islandness these places embody echo, in a variety of ways, those of the other islands studied in the thesis, and so the first strand of the chapter looks at the continuities between Árainn, Bardsey, and, to a lesser extent, Orford Ness, and these

[8] According to ongoing research, the wren is growing bigger than its mainland counterparts, the mouse has become carnivorous, and the sheep are getting smaller (*Hebrides: Islands on the Edge* 2013: n.p.). In the case of the sheep, the suggestion has been put forward that their accelerated 'evolution' has been generated by the way in which climate change has affected their breeding and survival patterns (Connor 2009: n.p.).

outliers of the Outer Hebrides, as well as the ways in which the authors navigate and negotiate some of the existing tropes of islandness. However, given their remote locations, and their 'post-human' condition (in the sense that their original human populations have disappeared), these Scottish islands also offer new dimensions of islandness that have not, as yet, been explored in this research. One of these new dimensions is the sense of vulnerability and instability that their histories evoke, and so the second section of the chapter investigates the way in which the evidence of both human loss and also population crashes in other species leads to reflection upon ecological flux.

Another new dimension is the way in which these islands seem to magnify the strangeness of certain aspects of the interaction between the human and the more-than-human world. Macfarlane, citing Richard Kearney, writes about the medieval practice of *navigatio,* whereby Celtic scholars would make journeys of exodus and return, the aim of which was 'to undergo an apprenticeship to signs of strangeness with a view to becoming more attentive to the meanings of one's own time and place—geographical, spiritual, intellectual' (2012a: 119). The third section of the chapter devotes itself to exploring some of the signs of strangeness that come to light in the primary texts, in order to reflect on some of the 'meanings' of the British and Irish archipelago in the early years of the 21st century. Jamie's mention of the 'Age of Satellites' (2012: 158), as noted, draws our attention to a perhaps surprising feature of these texts: the presence in the narratives of complex modern technologies. This is the only chapter of the thesis to focus on 21st century texts, so it is perhaps fitting that its final strand finds itself engaging to some degree with the technologically-mediated character of the current age, exploring the implications of modern technologies in these texts, and considering the islands' potential as stepping off points for the future.

In theoretical terms, the chapter uses the various insights offered by these islands to assess contemporary formulations of posthumanism from an ecocritical perspective, and to argue towards a possible future direction for ecocriticism. While continuing to explore the implications of a new materialist perspective on human immersion in the world of matter, the chapter takes issue with the tendency in posthumanist ecocriticism thus far to elide discussion of human technicity. As we saw in the Introduction to the thesis, Louise Westling's '*animot* posthumanism' (2006: 29), represents something of a deep ecological take on the decentred human, emphasising above all our imbrication in the life of the planet. She explicitly dismisses the value of developing an ecocritical approach to 'techno posthumanism' (29), which she sees as characterised by a transhumanist ambition to

transcend the limitations of the human body altogether via genetic manipulation and forms of cyborg hybridity. For Westling, a cyborg definition of the human as a being fused with the tools we have designed only furthers the Cartesian conception of humans as 'transcendent minds manipulating a realm of material otherness' (29). She states:

> Such a posthuman vision does nothing to address the dilemmas posed by a threatened environment, but instead implies that we can escape involvement in the rhythms of growth and decay in the biosphere. The techno posthuman does not seem to offer much to ecocriticism. (29-30)

Cary Wolfe, however, argues that posthumanism, while strongly encouraging us to reconceptualise the human as one creature among the 'entire sensorium of living beings and their own autopoietic ways of 'bringing forth a world'' (2010: xxv), also requires that we,

> attend to the specificity of the human […] acknowledging that it is fundamentally a prosthetic creature that has coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is. (xxv)

The revelation of the presence of modern technologies in the narratives of these Scottish islands suggests the relevance of Wolfe's view, and implies a need to reassess, and perhaps reframe, the figure of the cyborg, allowing for a more nuanced view of the relationship between humans and technology. This is all the more the case since recent conceptualisations of technology characterise it as forming 'our extended body' (Kelly 2010 n.p.) rather than an augmentation of our dis-embodied transcendent minds—a perspective that links technology with embodiment in a manner that may render it more acceptable to ecophenomenological posthumanisms. Taking its cue from Wolfe's assertion of the importance of attending to the specificity and technicity of the human, the discussion here moves beyond the confines of existing contemporary material ecocriticism, and draws most significantly on the recent work of the posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti.

Like the new materialists, and the ecophenomenological strand of material ecocriticism, Braidotti also emphasises the importance of developing 'an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the nonhuman or "earth" others' (2013: 49)—a post-anthropocentric perspective that moves away from binary distinctions and speciesism towards 'an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, others) can do' (71-2). This, for Braidotti, is a necessary component of 'the recognition of deep *zoe*-egalitarianism between humans and animals' (71), the development of 'non-unitary' subjectivities (93) and the fostering of a sense of 'co-presence, that is to say the simultaneity of being in the world together' (169). But while Braidotti highlights the

darker side of the use of technology—for example its deployment in modern warfare through remotely-operated drones—like Wolfe, she nevertheless recognises the human drive towards technicity as an inescapable element of the posthuman world. Discussing contemporary technological advances such as cloning, hand-held electronic devices, and prosthetic limbs she argues:

> Human, all too posthuman, these extensions and enhancements of what bodies can do are here to stay. Are we going to be able to catch up with our posthuman selves, or shall we continue to linger in a theoretical and imaginative state of jet-lag in relation to our lived environment? This is not Huxley's *Brave New World*, that is to say a dystopian rendition of the worst modernist nightmares. Nor is it a trans-humanist delirium of transcendence from the corporeal frame of the contemporary human. This is a new situation we find ourselves in: the immanent here and now of a posthuman planet. (Braidotti 2013: 197)

One of the key areas of exploration suggested by this immanent, posthuman here and now is, for Braidotti, the 'complexity of factors that structure the posthuman subject'. Among these factors she lists: 'the new proximity to animals, the planetary dimension and high level of technological mediation' (2013: 72). As I shall argue below, in many respects these are just the kind of factors that these islands on the edge of the world seem to body forth.

Continuities and negotiations

As suggested above, some of the responses to islands represented in the texts studied here have much in common with features discussed in earlier chapters, reflecting similar elements such as a sense of the authors' personal connection to the islands, a feeling for the landscapes' dynamic more-than-human agencies, and an apprehension of deep time. As with Robinson, Chamberlain and Evans, Nicolson's attachment to the Shiants is seen as personal, and from the heart. He writes: 'At times in the last two decades, these islands have been the most important thing in my life. They are a kind of heartland for me, a core place' (2001: 2). He also feels that at certain moments he and the islands have become as one, an experience that has subsequently shaped his identity. In terms that resonate with Evans' sense of the dissolution of self into the island world, he writes:

> I have felt at times, and perhaps this is a kind of delirium, no gap between me and the place. I have absorbed it and been absorbed by it, as if I have no existence apart from it. I have been shaped by those island times and find it difficult now to achieve any kind of distance from them. (3)

The Shiants also offer Nicolson the kind of intensification of experience reported by Evans. He writes 'I have never known a place where life is so thick, experience so immediate or the barriers between self and the world so tissue-thin' (13). Macfarlane cites

Nicolson's feeling of having been shaped by the islands in the account of his own visit to the Shiants in *The Old Ways*, adding his personal perception: 'I felt a sensation of candour and amplitude, of the body and mind opened up, of thought diffusing at the body's edges rather than ending at the skin' (2012a: 109). This observation shows the islands effecting in the human a sense of permeability that has a parallel in their own porous margins.

The islands can also be seen as exhibiting the kind of 'power of place' noted by Kate Rigby (2004: 12)—the belief that some places have an integral power to conjure a pre-conceptual response rather than being a passive 'blank screen for human projections' (13). Even before one steps onto them, according to Nicolson, these islands make their presence felt. He argues that if the Shiants were just five hundred and fifty acres of moorland no one would ever have noticed them, but the physical conditions of their islandness render them extraordinary: the Shiants 'are not modest' he writes, 'they stand out high and undoubtable, four miles or so off the coast of Lewis' (2001), and he goes on to detail further reasons for their power. They are

> surrounded by tide-rips in the Minch, with black cliffs five hundred feet tall dropping into a cold, dark, peppermint sea, with seals lounging at their feet, the lobsters picking their way between the boulders and the kelp and thousands upon thousands of sea birds wheeling above the rocks. (1)

The passage also demonstrates that notions of more-than-human vitality and agency are as applicable here as they were to Bardsey and Árainn. Likewise Jamie's assessment of gannets in the *Sightlines* essay 'The Gannetry' has much in common with Evans' evocation of these birds' biosemiotic resonance in her poem 'Gannets'. 'Gannets glitter' Jamie writes, 'They're made for vision, shine in any available light, available to see and be seen' (2012: 85).

It is not only the vibrancy and purpose of the creatures that is recognised here. Evans' sense of Bardsey Island itself constantly making and remaking itself is echoed in Jamie's reflection in 'On Rona':

> I had the sensation I always have on Atlantic islands, in summertime, when the clouds pass quickly and light glints on the sea—a sense that the world is bringing itself into being moment by moment. Arising and passing away in the same breath. (2012: 186)

Nicolson, like Evans and Chamberlain, who find Bardsey moving to meet them, also has a sense of the Shiants actively welcoming visitors: 'The Shiants are stretching their arms around me' (2001: 44). There is a comparable sense of agency in Jamie's observation of St Kilda: 'Ever more birds passed alongside, and St Kilda was defining itself as we neared' (2012: 139). For Nicolson, the Shiants in their totality are conceived of as being very much alive: 'I could feel the islands sighing in the light, their pores expanding, the vegetable life

reaching out from its winter retreat' (2001: 77). The intense and vibrant allure of these places combines with their apparent boundedness to foster 'dreams of total knowledge' (Macfarlane 2012a: 111). Like Robinson on Árainn, Nicolson has a vision of a good step. He sets out to map every aspect of the Shiants. *Sea Room* is an attempt, he writes,

> to tell the whole story, as I now understand it, of a tiny place in as many dimensions as possible: geologically, spiritually, botanically, historically, culturally, aesthetically, ornithologically, etymologically, emotionally, politically, socially, archaeologically and personally. (2001: 5)

What Nicolson discovers, of course, is that each one of these dimensions is itself multi-dimensional.

On these islands the phenomenon of deep time also reveals itself, as it does on Árainn and Bardsey, in their embodiment of millions of years of geological change. Nicolson notes, 'The Shiants, or at least most of them, are about fifty-eight and a half million years old' (2001: 81). Deep time here is also evidenced by the animal life. As already suggested, in these outlying islands and the texts they inform, there is much to be learnt from the more-than-human inhabitants. Thus, for Nicolson, sightings of shags remind him of planetary life that long predates the human. As you smell, hear and see these creatures,

> you can feel in the creep of your skin that you are somehow, in this coming encounter, penetrating a scale of time that can be measured only geologically. The shag was born half as long ago as the Alps were made. The shag, or something very like it, flew over the seas in which the ichthyosaurs swam. The shag is as old as the Giant's Causeway in Antrim, as Staffa, as the Cuillins in Skye. Here today, it is older than the rocks on which it sits. (184)

These immense geological timescales point up not only the short span of the existence of *homo sapiens* but also the way in which geological features themselves are vulnerable to change. Just as Robinson observes that 'Unless vaster earth-processes intervene Aran will ultimately dwindle to a little reef and disappear' (2008: 28), Nicolson notes the slow dissolution of his islands:

> The cliffs themselves are a symptom of the slices being taken out of them and the hard edges of the islands are signs of destruction in progress. […] Fergus Gibb reckons that 'a million years or two should see the Shiants off'. (2001: 90)

On the Shiants, then, as on the other small islands studied in this thesis, temporal frames not usually accessible to our comprehension, are made tangible, and experienced phenomenologically in the 'creep of your skin'. Neither is it a momentary interpenetration of time scales. Here 'history collapses' (Nicolson 2001: 67), and instead, as on Árainn, Bardsey and Orford Ness, different eras co-exist in layers and currents. It is, Nicolson

writes ‘a place in which many different times coexist, flowing at different speeds, enshrining different worlds’ (67).

For Nicolson this coexistence almost, but not quite, allows the dead to slip back into the world of the living, as they seem to at times on Bardsey. Broaching a subject he finds ‘almost undiscussable’ (2001: 175), he writes of the feeling he has when out on the sea in his boat *Freyja* late in the evening, that he only has ‘to look to the other end of the boat for some other figure to be there, sorting out the ropes, wrapping the plaid around them’ (175), and he seems to require some vigorous negative assertion to persuade himself that other figures *aren’t* there:

> Of course they never are. Of course not. The world is not like that, but there is often something else in the wind, which is, I suppose, the potential that they might be there, quite ordinarily, without any kind of fuss being made. (175)

Macfarlane, lying on the machair[9] of the Shiants at sunset, also experiences the complexity of island time: ‘Time, briefly, felt not absent (the islander’s dream of ahistory) but rather multiplied in its forms’ (2012a: 112). When asked in an interview to expand on this observation, Macfarlane answered that it was in fact Nicolson’s description of this phenomenon that prompted his response—a prompt

> which was then overwhelmed or extended by the phenomenal: a sudden surge, keener than most comparable surges I've had, of countless forms of activity and, particularly, rhythm, simultaneously in operation. (2015: n.p.)

These reflections draw to our attention to the richness and plurality of island time and also to the archipelagic nature of the island literature studied in this thesis, whereby there are forms of intertextuality, and intersections, echoes and references between the texts.[10]

It is also clear that Macfarlane brings all of his literary skills and sensibilities to the description of such moments. In the same interview he goes on to describe in more detail the way in which he approached writing about The Minch, a strait that connects the Inner with the Outer Hebrides:

> I spent a long time working on the few paragraphs about the experience of being atop the tides of the Minch when they turned—trying to find ways in which to allow prose rhythms to carry some affective shadow of the experience itself, such that they could bear covertly upon the reader. Similarly, later, trying to find ways of quickening and slowing syntax, and graining acoustic echoes into the sentences, such that the reading experience approximates in a more-than-simply-mimetic

[9] A type of coastal dune grassland, found particularly in the Outer Hebrides.
[10] In my interview with Evans, for example, she talks of having read Nicolson’s work and adds ‘I’d love to have written *Sea Room’* (2013: n.p.).

> manner to the kinds of recursion, vibrancy and contrast I was seeking to describe or evoke. (2015: n.p.)

This account of the painstaking crafting of his non-fiction prose, and of his desire to avoid the simply mimetic by reaching towards an almost phenomenological and affective experience for the reader—one that might be able to evoke, in this case, the aquapelagic sensations of navigating the Minch—emphasises the literary ambitions of the work, and makes clear Macfarlane's sense of the potential of literature to body forth experience. It is a perception that lends weight to the argument that literary writing may be expressive of experiences of islandness that may not lie within the scope of less creative and less deliberately crafted discourse. Macfarlane himself adds,

> *The Old Ways* is at least activated by a belief in embodied or enacting form, and in pattern-making and narrative as themselves undertaking analysis in ways that can't be translated out into an improved medium of propositional prose. (2015: n.p.)

Nevertheless, there is perhaps a hint of criticism in Macfarlane's notion of 'the islander's dream of ahistory' (2012a: 112), that may reflect more negatively on the literary tropes of islandness, the allure of 'ahistory' perhaps implying a desire for escapism, a romantic construction of place that elides politics and social realities. It alerts us to the fact that here, as in earlier chapters, the writers are consciously negotiating existing tropes of islandness, and more broadly, are mindful of a need to position themselves in relation to what John Wylie (as discussed in Chapter 1) calls a 'complex romantic legacy' (2012: 366) of landscape writing. As we have seen, at times that relationship can be ambivalent and even contradictory, reflecting the writer's simultaneous resistance and susceptibility to prior constructions. The temptation to romanticise the islands' isolation, remoteness and sublimity is perhaps all the more powerful in these now-uninhabited sites. So we find Nicolson himself at times gesturing towards a sense of escape from mundane human concerns, allowing the potential for more profound, even transcendental impulses:

> Islands feed an appetite for the absolute. They are removed from the human world, from its business and noise. Whatever the reality, a kind of silence seems to hang about them. It is not silence, because the sea beats on the shores and the birds scream and flutter above you. But it is a virtual silence, an absence of communication which reduces the islander to a naked condition in front of the universe. (2001: 155)

Although Nicolson rapidly demonstrates his awareness of and resistance to the kind of literary tropes of islandness conjured by that sense of being alone with the universe, stating self-reflexively, 'It is tempting in these circumstances to turn Crusoe in the face of loneliness' (156), elsewhere his account betrays his attraction to just such a Crusoe-

informed trope of resourceful adventuring. As we saw in the Introduction, this trope has been seen as resulting in the construction of island life as, at best, a character-building excursion and, at worst, as Diana Loxley (1990) argues, as a blueprint for imperialism. In this latter respect Nicolson's story is complicated by his ownership of the islands. He explains:

> My father bought the islands and gave them to me because as a very young man he had felt enlarged and excited by the ownership of a place like this, by the experience of being there alone or with friends, by a nature so unadorned and with a sea and landscape so huge that it allowed an escape into what felt like another dimension. (2001: 2)

Nicolson is well aware of the controversies surrounding this kind of ownership, and devotes significant space in the early part of the book to working through the issues, explaining ways in which he has striven to merit this ownership (learning to sail alone to and from the islands, and developing an unsurpassed personal knowledge of them, for example), and showing his impassioned commitment to a kind of welcoming stewardship (he offers an open invitation to anyone who wishes to stay on the islands). However, he is less self-aware when it comes to his construction of the Shiants as, ultimately, a place of masculine self-discovery. Recounting his wife's reluctance to spend time there, he says of the bothy, 'It is quite unfeminine. There are no curtains' (65) and he concludes in relation to the islands: 'They are a young man's place and always have been' (4).

For Jamie, such a combination of masculinity and ownership is likely to be complete anathema. In her review of Macfarlane's *The Wild Places,* she notes a prevalence of the first person singular in his accounts of places, and argues that it 'begins to feel like appropriation […] an unfortunate sense that we're in the company, however engaging, of another "owner"' (2008: n.p.). She also laments what she sees as a lack of people in Macfarlane's text, suggesting that the landscapes have been almost wilfully emptied out in order to render them more 'wild'. With a strong awareness of issues around politics, socio-economics and gender, she asserts, 'There are lots of people, many of them women, who live in, or spend long seasons in places like Cape Wrath, St Kilda, Mingulay' (2008: n.p.) and she states: 'Class comes in here' (n.p.). In the essay 'Three ways of looking at St Kilda' she also sends up the masculine Crusoe analogy in a way that comically undermines any gendered notions of 'island adventure'. After her first thwarted attempt to reach the archipelago she returns home to her family, wryly observing: 'I'd been on the desert islands, my husband had been at home with the infants. He was the one who looked ravaged, like Robinson Crusoe' (2012: 135). She also satirises any romantic expectations

of her travels. After a second more successful journey to St Kilda results in a visit which is unexpectedly truncated after the weather turns, she writes:

> They laughed when I got home. Wild, remote, famous, oft-imagined St Kilda, so theatrically abandoned…Did you get there? Yup, but not for long. In fact, I've spent longer standing at bus stops. (142)

In fact, Jamie herself is not always immune to romantic notions of place, but her susceptibilities to such discourses are always noted with a self-reflexive edge. With a touch of self-satire, for example, she writes of Mainland Orkney: 'The surging sea, the wind, the cliffs' bulk against the night sky were (forgive me) sublime' (2012: 26). In reporting the words of Donald Wilkie, the skipper of the yacht making a voyage to the St Kilda archipelago, who keenly feels the responsibility imposed on him by the heightened expectations of his passengers, Jamie confesses her own attraction to the islands' romantic pre-troping:

> 'It's like the Holy Grail. The edge of the world. That's what they come looking for. It's what they've heard about and nothing else will do.'
>
> That's what I'd wanted myself. Sea-cliffs and abandonment. (134)

But even in the face of her desire for sea cliffs and abandonment, Jamie retains a consciousness of what these romantic discourses elide. In a comical episode in which she mistakes piped (Elton John) music on the Orkney and Shetlands ferry for a human voice in distress, she writes: 'I scanned the water, there were only the waves, the wide, oil-dark sea' (6). This immediately evokes a very different cultural construction of the islands' setting from the Romantic sublime, the Homeric, mythic resonances of Chamberlain's 'wine dark rocks' (1996: 60), or even the vibrant matter of Evans' 'wet-dark rocks' (1995: 64). Here the 'oil-dark' North Sea is integrally linked with its 21st century socio-economic realities. As she scans the horizon she spots 'three brash lights […] They were North Sea oil platforms, and even at this distance they looked frenzied' (2012: 6).

Not only is Jamie committed to acknowledging the economic forces that have helped to shape these landscapes, she is also keen to question London-centric notions of remoteness. Speaking of her own and her friends' attraction to the 'fabled outliers' of St Kilda, Rona, and Sula Sgeir, and their trips to islands such as the Shiants, she writes: 'Places with such long human histories, I soon came to distrust any starry-eyed notions of 'wild' or 'remote'. Remote from what? London? But what was London?' (2012: 143). She contrasts the romantic, touristic view of these places with that of people who have work to do. At the end of 'Three ways of looking at St Kilda', given the choice of staying on the island with bad weather coming in and with the prospect of having to remain there till the

weather calms again or leaving immediately for Harris, she opts for the latter, explaining: 'It wasn't as if I had work to do, like the surveyors. To linger on St Kilda just for the sake of it would merely have been romance' (163).

The paragraphs above have highlighted the continuities between previous chapters (especially Chapters 1 and 2) and this final chapter, both in terms of the qualities of islandness that have emerged and the authors' negotiations of certain existing island tropes. I move now to discussion of the ways in which these 'islands at the edge' reveal aspects of islandness not yet discussed in detail in the thesis, beginning with the association of these islands, notwithstanding their vibrant life and their global interconnections, with the provisionality of life, both human and animal.

Vulnerability and Flux

James Hamilton-Paterson argues that 'The whole concept of the island, which until recently was implicit with all manner of promise, is now redolent of loss' (2007: 71). In the literature of these islands at the edge of the world, there is certainly a sense of the instability of human populations and, at times, a palpable sense of loss. There is, for example, an elegiac tone to Nicolson's account of the depopulation of the Shiants, when he writes: 'the place-names of the Shiants record not memories but forgetfulness, the washing away of human lives, the fragility and tissue-thin vulnerability of human culture to the erosion of time' (2001: 74). Jamie seems to share this sense of flux. In answer to the interview question 'Do you feel that islands are especially rich sites for thinking about human being-in-the-world?' she replied, 'Once-inhabited islands are, they speak eloquently about the human coming-and-going' (2015: n.p.). It is a perception that is particularly applicable to St Kilda, whose evacuation in 1930 became headline news—'a media event, with reporters and cameras' (Jamie 2012: 156)—leaving in its wake a sense of sadness at the demise of ways of living that had endured for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Judith Schalansky begins her page on St Kilda with the bald statement: 'St Kilda you don't exist' (2012: 48), and the sense of annihilation this encapsulates is mirrored, at least initially, in Jamie's description of the 'modern myth' (2012: 132) of St Kilda, an island broken by the very modernity that has now mythologised it. Recollecting an experience, possibly from her primary school days, Jamie writes,

> One afternoon we were shown a film. Barefoot bearded men, and women cowled in shawls, and innumerable seabirds filled the screen. There were dreadful cliffs that the men lowered themselves down, to take birds' eggs and the birds themselves. We learned that the islands lay forty miles west of Lewis and Harris, out in the ocean, which was too far for much contact of communication, in

> those days. Nonetheless, people had lived out there for a thousand years or more. They grew a few crops and kept a strange kind of wild sheep, and they ate seabirds, and seabirds' eggs. They made shoes out of gannets and medicine out of fulmar oil; they stitched their clothes with feathers.
>
> But their way of life broke on the wheel of the modern world. (132)

The arrangement of this description, with the hiatus represented by the gap between the two paragraphs, emphasises a sense of the disjunction between the two narratives—one representing ways of being-in-the-world that had barely changed since the Stone Age, and the other the catastrophically rapid and destructive impact of modernity.

The sense of loss is one that infiltrates Jamie's other essays about islands, and sees her employing tropes of islandness in order to negotiate her response, weighing lost Edens against utopian futures. Discussing the Monach islands she argues,

> These are the rarities in human history, the places from which we've retreated. These once-inhabited places play a different air to the uninhabited; they suggest the lost past, the lost Eden, not the Utopia to come. (2005: 63)

As we saw in the Introduction to the thesis, Jonathan Bate argues that 'In our twenty-first century, we need to treasure the memory or the myth of an island which Prospero has left, an ecosystem which man is content to leave alone' (2000: 93). It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Prospero has really exited stage left from these islands: human activity of various kinds continues, and whether or not one subscribes to the rhetoric of the 'Anthropocene' (the as-yet unofficial term for the current geological age introduced by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000), we come to these places at a time when there is no ecosystem on the planet left untouched by anthropogenic action (see McKibben 2006). However, these *are* islands from which human populations have departed. But for Jamie, ever compassionate towards the people who lived and worked in these places, their departure speaks more of loss than the ecological opportunity to which Bate gestures.

Playing a role in this sense of loss is the idea that the islanders would have developed an extraordinarily detailed knowledge of their islands. As we saw in Chapter 3, Nicolson suggests that Jean-Jacques Rousseau's fascination with the Île Saint-Pierre was inspired by its status as 'the Eden away from society that he sought' (2001: 345), a place in which every blade of grass could have inspired the writing of a book. It is this kind of fervour that Robinson brings to the stones of Aran and Nicolson to the Shiants, a form of knowledge that Jamie attributes to the islanders of Rona: 'Outwith the enclosing dyke lay the rest of the island, which the people must have known down to every blade of grass, every stone' (2012: 192). For Sebald, of course, there is a more sinister aspect to this exact

knowledge: he finds that every blade of grass in the area in which he startles the hare on Orford Ness is burnt into his (traumatized) memory. However, there is also a darker side to this Outer Hebridean paradise. Registering the equal force of the converse of the Eden trope—the island prison—Douglas Dunn, in his poem 'St Kilda's Parliament: 1879-1979: *The photographer revisits his picture*', sees the St Kildan islanders as enduring the 'manacles of place' (1981: 14), and both Dunn and Schalansky refer to the very real problem of infant mortality on the island prior to its evacuation: 'two-thirds of the newborn babies die' (Schalansky 2012: 48).

Given these well-documented human tragedies, it is perhaps no surprise that Jamie tempers any impulses towards romanticising island life. As often appears to be the case with her writing, initial responses are worked through, considered from all angles, and modified. Thus a stay on Hirta brings her to an understanding of, and respect for, those people who made the decision to leave their small island 'Eden', which now becomes, in her view, not the lost idyll but rather a place in which it no longer made sense to live. She finds the island troubling, not because of the intrusion of 'the satellites and the cruise liners and environmental health officers' (2012: 161)—though undoubtedly these are all spokes in the wheel of the modern world—but because of the message the ruined houses seem to body forth: 'They didn't sing of a lost idyll, those cold empty doors. If the cottages spoke at all, it was to say—Look, they made their decision. They quit. They moved on' (161-2). It is a pragmatic interpretation that undermines any romanticisation of the story and reflects a realisation, perhaps, that *these things happen*: people make decisions according to their situation, and the world moves on. This more generalised sense of vulnerability and flux is one Nicolson also puts forward when he records a conversation with a historian, Professor Robert Dodgshon:

> What he impressed on me again and again over the next forty-eight hours was never to think of fixity on a place like this. Human occupation of the Shiants would always have come and gone like the tides, a filling and ebbing, a restless geography. (2001: 204)

In these once inhabited islands, then, populations have always fluctuated. The same is true for the islands' nonhuman inhabitants. Jamie's essay 'On Rona' considers the population crashes of both human and nonhuman animals on the island. She discusses the study of Leach's storm petrel by the ornithologist Stuart Murray, which reveals a sudden reduction in numbers:

> He'd covered about half the island with his tapes. Abruptly he said, 'There's some consistency emerging here. Almost forty percent decline, I think, all over. And very suddenly'. (2012: 203)

When Jamie asks him if this is as a result of climate change he replies: '"*I don't know.* But something's going on out there"' (204, emphasis in original). His careful elaboration of his answer reflects the scientific understanding that there is no such thing as what Daniel Botkin, critiquing the concept, calls an ecologically 'steady state' (2012: xiii), and that it may be a mistake to jump to conclusions:

> Stuart often said there was no such thing as 'natural harmony'. It was a dynamic. Populations expand, then crash. Mysterious things happen—catastrophic things sometimes, on the island, everywhere. Nothing stays the same. (2012: 204)

This move towards an ecological model of flux and change as opposed to harmony and balance is an important point in relation to islands, challenging, as does Greg Garrard in his essay 'Problems Concerning Islands', both 'the classic ecological view of the island as a paradigm of equilibrium' (Garrard 2007: 21), and the island as a paradigm of '*vulnerability*' (13, emphasis in original). Islands *are* vulnerable, but catastrophic population crashes can happen anywhere.

Nevertheless, despite this altered understanding of ecology, there is still a special poignancy to the human story of Rona, as Jamie explains:

> Our attitude to the village houses we explored and the fields we walked was tempered by a particular piece of knowledge. This: the Rona people hadn't simply quit their tenancy and sailed away to a life less isolated. Neither had they been forcibly cleared. The village was abandoned because the people had died—all wiped out, suddenly. (204)

Thus, although she is aware that populations, whether of humans or other creatures are always in flux, and that ecosystems are generally involved in process rather than stability, the catastrophic demise of the Rona inhabitants—the discovery around 1680 of an island of corpses—is a shocking image that merits further thought. Jamie, struck by this story, uses Rona as a model for two potential future scenarios. In a 2006 *Guardian* article she suggests that images of these once-inhabited places might, rather than evoking a lost past, provide us with a necessary glimpse of a future in which the tide of humanity retreats ever further:

> The ancient chapel, the village and the long-forsaken lazy-beds are truly poignant, truly evocative of a lost past. We can imagine that past as sweet, as though bathed in bronze light. As I crept around the houses, though, I wondered if such places aren't now offering us pictures of a possible future, too. A remote, changed future, when more once-inhabited places will be abandoned. We can see beginning already floods here, drought there. We may need such images as Rona provides to help us imagine the world to come, because beneath the surf and birds' calls you can hear the long withdrawing roar of human occupation. (n.p.)

In this excerpt the abandoned landscape of Rona is seen as prefiguring other future abandonments as humanity recedes in the face of climate change. Jamie's second futuristic vision is perhaps more optimistic, involving the possible re-population of Rona in times to come. Contemplating the remains of a dwelling that has been inhabited, abandoned and then re-inhabited over a period of thousands of years, she speculates, 'perhaps someday in the future, when unimaginable change has come to the life we know, a few acres far out in the Atlantic might be pressed into service again' (2012: 207).

These once-populated islands, then, enable us take a relatively objective view of the ecological flux that impacts on human and nonhuman animal life alike. Jamie ends the whole *Sightlines* collection with the observation: 'The wind and sea. Everything else is provisional. A wing's beat and it's gone' (2012: 242). It is a perspective that, one could argue, represents a form of ecologically informed posthumanism, since it removes the human animal from centre stage. These outlying islands and their surrounding seas, like Robinson's Árainn, foster the apprehension of both a pre- and a post- human planet. They also perhaps help to signal to the human the arrival of a period of epochal change in which the construct of the human must itself be radically reassessed. Jamie's allusion to Matthew Arnold's 'Dover Beach', in her description of 'the long withdrawing roar' (2006: n.p.) of human occupation is significant here. Arnold was, of course, referring in his poem to the diminishment of the 'sea of faith' (1867: 112), but perhaps also more generally responding to the gathering intellectual turmoil of the Victorian era, in which many prior conceptualisations of both the human and the more-than-human were in the process of being utterly confounded. We find ourselves now, arguably, at a comparable moment of destabilisation—intellectual, economic, environmental, ontological—that requires a reconfiguration of notions of what it means to be human. It is perhaps this sense of long-term uncertainty coupled with a questioning of contemporary human concerns that helps to focus the writers' attention on the 'signs of strangeness', especially in terms of human behaviour and impact on the more-than-human world, to be found on these islands—signs that might shed light on the meanings of our own time.

Signs of Strangeness

I) The *guga* hunt

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, excerpts from Kearney's description of the medieval Celtic practice of *navigatio*—the voyage out in search of signs of strangeness—are cited by Macfarlane in *The Old Ways.* It forms the epigraph to a section of the book

that takes as its subject the annual Outer Hebridean *guga* hunt. Every year, as Macfarlane explains, a boat sets out from Ness in Lewis with a party of about ten men bound for Sula Sgeir. They spend around two weeks encamped on the rocky island during which time they catch and kill two thousand gannet chicks—the *gugas*—then transport them back to Lewis to sell them for human consumption. The birds are caught using nooses on poles, clubbed to death with cudgels, and then

> plucked, singed, seared. Then their wings are chopped off, they're scrubbed again, split open and emptied of their innards, and their evacuated bodies are placed on 'the Pile'—a great altar-cairn of *guga* corpses. (Macfarlane 2012a: 122)

It is an ancient custom. While the first *guga* hunt was recorded in 1549 (Macfarlane 2012a: 119), 'prehistoric evidence from elsewhere in the archipelago suggests a practice with roots at least as far back as the Iron Age' (MacDonald 2014: n.p.). However it is a tradition that in recent years has attracted controversy and censure.[11] Fraser MacDonald, in a 2014 *Guardian* article, notes calls from the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) and online pressure groups such as 'Care2' to ban the hunt because of concerns around cruelty to animals.

MacDonald advances the counter-argument that the hunt is justified in economic and cultural terms, as a form of 'subsistence human predation' and a means through which 'we can remember this aspect of the vital struggle for survival on our Atlantic coasts' (2014: n.p.). He suggests that it can even be viewed as a form of environmentalism in itself. He marshals the views of the anthropologist Tim Ingold to support this argument, in particular Ingold's assertion that hunter-gatherers develop a knowledge of animals that is 'not knowledge in the natural scientific sense, of things and how they work. It is rather as we would speak of it in relation to persons' (Ingold 2000: 72). MacDonald suggests that the *guga* hunt reflects and enshrines just this kind of deeper knowledge of animals—a much closer engagement with the environment than the 'spectatorial gaze' of the conservationist (2014: n.p.). It is a practice that might be seen as in keeping with the early descriptions of the islanders' profound ability to read the biosemiotic messages immanent in the more than human world, and the knowledge thereby gained, and as linking them with the hunter-gatherers of earlier Ages. MacDonald argues:

> The guga harvest is a living remnant of a world where the lives of its avian and human inhabitants were completely entwined; and where the ancient practice of hunting depended on an intuitive

[11] Debate that intensified after the Ness Football Club proposed a World Gannet Eating Championship, with the first competition taking place in December 2013 (MacDonald 2014: n.p.).

> knowledge of other animals—even if this was rarely admitted to the annals of western science. (n.p.)

Macfarlane's description also shows the men as deeply connected with the island, stressing the co-presence and comparability of human and nonhuman animals reflected in their hunting practice, since all are variously engaged in forms of predation:

> Death and murder were everywhere underway. For Sula is a killing ground: a gathering point for predators and prey. Seals come for the big fish, gannets come for the herring and the sand eels, skuas come for the adult gannets, and the men come for the *gugas.* (135)

Both Macfarlane and MacDonald, then, reflect a sense of the legitimacy and authenticity of this long-standing practice. When I asked Macfarlane about his account of the guga hunt, he expressed his support for the hunters, but suggested that rather than having actively eschewed taking sides in the text, his description represents

> more an attempt to record and evoke the strong sense of SS [Sula Sgeir] as a temporary autonomous zone, enjoying exceptional status in legal but also mythical and ecological terms. (2015: n.p.)[12]

His comment here reveals an aspect of islandness that plays significantly into the narrative—the sense that these events are possible only because Sula Sgeir is an island, and can function, because of its geographical remoteness, as a 'temporary autonomous zone'. In this phrase he pinpoints something of the ongoing cultural value of the small island. Strange things are able to happen here because it falls outside the jurisdictions, myths and ecological injunctions of the 21st century mainland—potentially enabling us, as Macfarlane suggests, to become more attentive to the 'meanings of [our] own time and place—geographical, spiritual, intellectual' (2012a: 119).

Perhaps it is because of the strangenesses that this autonomy and exceptional status highlight, that, notwithstanding his stated support for the practice of *guga* hunting, Macfarlane's account begins to feel a little unsettling. The image of the 'altar-cairn' (Macfarlane 2012a: 122) of bird corpses, for example, raises questions, suggesting, with its connotations both of quasi-religious meaning and of the human marking out of place, an anthropocentric, and even transcendental, drive within the practice that sits uneasily with some contemporary ecological perspectives. The literary techniques Macfarlane employs

[12] His response continues,

> Sailing there in an open boat did feel like a recapitulation of a form of journey—exposed, committing—that had been made to that outlier many hundreds of times, over many hundreds of years, and it was true that I began to experience forms of mirage (the guano seen as snow on an impossible peak when I awoke), overlap and time-slip that seemed quietly in keeping with the atmospheres of misprision and vision that attended the 'wonder voyages' of the early pelerins/peregrini. The recurrent image of the lopped wings, of thwarted flight, of impossible levitations […] were means of registering these slippages and enfoldings. In contrast and conflict with those etherealisms were the brute facts of killing, skinning and predation, carried out by Dilworth as well as the Men of Ness, and I wanted those chapters to bring the sacral-miraculous into confrontation with the visceral-murderous. That was the hope at least! (2015: n.p.)

at this stage of the narrative and the allusions to other literature he makes reinforce this unsettling aspect of the episode. He begins the chapter with an imaginative reconstruction of the last *guga* hunting voyage made under sail:

> Listen now. Listen to the singing of the *guga* men on the bare rock of Sula Sgeir, hunched in a stone bothy on that little island far out in the North Atlantic, on an August morning nearly sixty years ago. (2012a: 119)

The imperative 'Listen', which mirrors the 'Listen' at the beginning of Brenda Chamberlain's *Tide-race*, alerts us to the idea that a form of storytelling, perhaps harking back to oral traditions, is about to commence—and with this comes the corollary expectation that a tale will be presented that has some kind of meaning for its contemporary audience.

It is significant that Macfarlane chooses to begin his account by conjuring up an occasion that took place nearly sixty years ago rather than his own 21st century encounter with the *guga* hunt (he notes that his own voyage to Sula Sgeir takes place in *Jubilee's* 75th year, locating it, since the boat was first launched in 1935, in 2010). Although he and his travelling companions coincide to the hour with the arrival of the modern day *guga* hunters, he sets much of the account 'in the Year of Our Lord 1953' (2012a: 120). In part this is because *Jubilee,* the boat he travels in to Sula Sgeir with Ian Stephen, 'was the boat in which the last *guga* hunters to reach Sula Sgeir under sail had travelled' (125) in 1953. However, there is also a sense in which Macfarlane deliberately creates an exaggerated sense of temporal distance from the scene, just as Sebald does from the boffins of Orford Ness. The archaic use of the expression 'in the Year of Our Lord' (a translation of the phrase *Anno Domini* from Medieval Latin) immediately positions the reader as the Medieval Celtic scholar engaged in *navigatio*—the search for signs of strangeness.

Moreover, he allows us space to assess those signs for ourselves. It is not until forty pages and two chapters later that he reflects more personally on the practice:

> I thought of how, once the *guga*-hunting party had departed from Sula Sgeir each year, the amputated wings of the dead gannets—4,000 wings from 2,000 thousand birds—were left lying on the summit, so that when the next big autumn storm came and the next big wind blew from the south or the west, thousands of these severed wings would lift from the surfaces of the island, such that it seemed, when seen from the sea, that the rock itself were trying to lift off in flight—an entire island rising into the air, like Swift's Laputa. (178)

The reference to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is telling. In alluding to a work that interrogates and satirises human mores and behaviour, (and to a particular episode of Swift's satire in which an island is key to the interrogation), Macfarlane highlights the

strangeness of the hunt. But rather than involving the reader in the competing discourses of economic and cultural traditions versus conservationism and accusations of cruelty to animals, his more oblique approach perhaps leads us to ponder our own reactions to the description—to explore *why* the practice might seem strange to us and to reflect upon the meanings of our own time and place.

Some of the meanings that might come under scrutiny here, when read through the lens of ecocriticism, are contemporary attitudes to nonhuman animals. The slaughter of two thousand gannet chicks has, at least for this reader, a shocking quality—a sense of boundaries being transgressed—though in many respects it is perhaps little different from (and possibly ethically far preferable to) the killing and eating of factory-farmed fowl. Gannets are not an endangered species. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) does not oppose the *guga* hunt: a spokesperson has been recorded as commenting, 'In conservation terms gannets are doing rather well, and are actually increasing nationally' (cited in Carrell 2010: n.p.). Perhaps the difficulty lies in an inability to fit the gannet hunt into the contemporary, western framework for conceptualising human/animal relationships.

Both Braidotti and Wolfe, drawing on earlier work by Jacques Derrida, identify the question of the animal (or, rather, the *animals*) as central to posthumanist enquiry, highlighting the necessity of unravelling the ways in which humanist assumptions have perpetuated what Wolfe calls *speciesism* (2003: 1)—a bias that has enabled and condoned the commodification and exploitation of animals, ensured their conceptual relegation to points lower than the human in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being, and reinforced the *a priori* assumption that the question of 'subjectivity' always pertains to the human. Braidotti cites Jorge Luis Borges' mock taxonomic division of animals into 'those we watch television with, those we eat and those we are scared of' (2013: 68), identifying these three categories as confining the human-animal interaction within classical parameters:

> namely, an oedipalized relationship (you and me together on the same sofa); an instrumental (thou shalt be consumed eventually); and a fantasmatic one (exotic, extinct infotainment objects of titillation). (68)

She points up the ways in which these classifications bolster the humanist subject's 'sense of supreme ontological entitlement' (68). The gannet chicks harvested on Sula Sgeir confound Borges' taxonomy: they cannot be oedipalised or exoticised, and at the same time they are difficult to instrumentalise, since they are wild, and not bred in a

domesticated environment, even if they *are* eventually eaten. If anything, then, as Macfarlane's comparison of the *guga* hunters with the seals, gannets and skuas suggests, they are 'prey', but this is not a term that features in Borges' taxonomy. The *gugas* thus demonstrate the ultimate inadequacy of those categories, and so perhaps also draw attention to what Wolfe identifies as the corollary 'fragility and 'sketchiness'' (2003: 51) of contemporary conceptualisations of the human animal and the ways in which we interact with the nonhuman world.

As I have already suggested in this chapter, the outliers of the Outer Hebrides are emerging as potent sites for posthumanist reflection on both humans and animals. They are certainly places in which animal subjectivities and phenomenologies become ever more apparent to us. While Macfarlane imagines the amputated wings of the slaughtered *guga* rising into the air in futile, purposeless flight, his description of the chicks that survive the hunt outlines their actual potential trajectory:

> The *guga* that survive the harvest will, eventually, stagger down the cliff ledges until they fall off and splash into the sea. They are water-bound for a couple of weeks, riding the waves and fasting until they are light enough to take flight and make their maiden voyages: winging down the west coast of Britain, the north-west peninsulas of France, through the Bay of Biscay, along the Atlantic façade, following their own sea roads—their migration paths—until at last they reach their winter home off West Africa. (2012a: 123)

This observation of the gannets' extraordinary physical and navigational feats adds to the sense in which, throughout the thesis, this bird has emerged as perhaps the epitome of more-than-human agency, biosemiotic resonance, and abilities that in many respects far outstrip those of the human. The meanings of the *guga* hunt are thus perhaps less about the competing gazes of the spectatorial conservationist or the deeply involved hunter, than about a shifting of the whole relationship between the human and the animal, as postanthropocentric perspectives begin to filter into our consciousness and shake our sense of ontological entitlement. This process is aided, as the final section of this chapter suggests, by an increasing and technologically mediated knowledge of the extraordinary things that animal bodies can do.

II) The plastic doll's head

The *guga* hunt is not the only sign of strangeness to come to light on these islands. As Evans argues, meaning seems to 'snag and gather' round islands (2008: 135). The same is true of 'things', which gather on their shores, brought there by the wind and waves from places sometimes far removed from them. The pollution of the Outer Hebrides is a subject

that arises even in Nicolson's paean to the Shiants, giving rise to some extraordinary material juxtapositions. He notes, in addition to concerns around radioactivity 'drifting up from Sellafield' (2001: 199), the fact that:

> The beaches of the Shiants are nowadays lined from end to end in multi-coloured plastic rubbish, and I can walk the length of them finding loo cleaners, soft drink bottles, cans of Coke with Japanese script, dolls' heads, Dettol and Domestos where in the past the shore was scattered with fish boxes on every one of which was the instruction 'Return to Lochinver'. (199)

The waste carried to these islands by the wind and waves bears witness once again to the global interconnectedness of these islands, a connection perhaps more pronounced and with more serious environmental implications in the 21st century than in the past when it was only pumice and molucca beans (Nicolson 2001: 2010) that travelled thousands of miles, and when the human-created waste was represented by fish boxes on the shore that only hailed from as far as the coast of the Scottish mainland and could (at least in theory) be returned and re-used.

The section that follows focuses on the strangeness of some of these contemporary items of litter, and the meanings that might be derived from them, largely through a reading of Jamie's essay 'Findings'. Focusing on the prominence in her essay of the image of a plastic doll's head (an item of debris we have already seen in Nicolson's description), the discussion explores the notion of 'material value'.[13] While Stacy Alaimo has rightly and powerfully drawn attention to the human body's subjection to indiscriminate forms of material 'trans-corporeality' (2008: 238), Jamie's meditation on material waste suggests that it is equally important to develop a sense of ways in which human materiality also *differs* from other materialities. An insight fostered by 'Findings' and Jamie's subtle investigation of our affective response to the items that litter the shores of the Monach islands, is the idea that the matter that forms the human body and other living tissue is qualitatively different from that of the chemical compounds of plastic.

Exploring the windswept landscapes of the Monach islands, Jamie and her travelling companions find host of different kinds of 'things': a 'perfect sphere of white quartz' (2005: 56), a dead whale, and parts of a small aeroplane. They also discover mounds of plastic waste. On Ceann Iar, one of her companions, Martin, shouts 'Can you believe all this plastic—all these floats, bottles? All this plastic rope!' (58), and Jamie elaborates: 'The cleavages between the sand dunes, where the wind and waves had driven it, were choked with plastic' (59). Further inland they find 'tangles of rope, plastic bottles,

[13] For an extended discussion of 'material value' see Marland (2015a).

shoes and aerosol cans' (59) along with a traffic cone. Jamie is quick to acknowledge that even the plastic findings have their own interest—generated by a kind of transposed familiarity:

> They had their own fascination, the shampoo and the milk cartons, the toilet-cleaner bottles we could turn over with our feet. Though the colours were faded and the labels long gone, we knew their shapes, had seen them ranked in supermarkets and hardware stores. Brushes, masking tape, training shoes, orange polypropylene net. (59)

An interesting element of this description is its lack of judgemental tone. Like Macfarlane with his account of the *guga* hunt, Jamie initially gives a fairly neutral response. The objects she lists are not necessarily ones that might call down an environmental reckoning upon our heads, but are rather the remnants of humdrum domesticity and physical work. Jamie seems prepared to see the human waste and the other material items that have in a sense also outlived their initial function, as essentially comparable. Thus she writes: 'At the tideline of every inlet […] were seals' vertebrae and whalebones, driftwood and plastic garbage' (59). She appears to worry most about the fact that the walkers do not seem more disturbed by the discovery of parts of a crashed plane: 'A plane had crashed, sometime, and we were unconcerned' (59). In answering her own anxieties here, she sees the whole naturalcultural assemblage as subject to the same action of wind, rain and sea currents, and in the process made equal, envisaged as material kin:

> Little wonder, when there were winds and currents strong enough to flense whales and scatter their bones across the machair. Here in the rain, with the rotting whale and the wheeling birds, the plastic floats and turquoise rope, the sealskins, driftwood and rabbit skulls, a crashed plane didn't seem untoward. If a whale, why not an aeroplane? If a lamb, why not a training shoe? (59-60)

One reason for this apparent even-handedness might be Jamie's deeply felt sense of human compassion, especially for the human at work in the landscape. Some of the plastic items washed up on the Monachs are the tools of working people—fishermen's nets, buoys, ropes—and Jamie makes a connection between these and earlier forms of human technicity on the islands. She references a historical account that describes the islanders using 'bent grass from the dunes, the very grass that trapped the plastic bottles and polyprop net, to make mats, rope, horse collars, heavy basket and sacks' (61). The islanders apparently boasted of the sacks' durability. This understandable desire for hardy materials perhaps puts into perspective our more recent adoption of plastic and other hyper-durable materials.

Notwithstanding this even-handedness, though, Jamie's account does begin to move towards a more focused and critical exploration of the implications of plastic waste.

The final item in her list of found things is 'the severed head of a doll. The doll still had tufts of hair, and if you tilted her she blinked her eyes in surprise' (2005: 60). The tufts of hair and the blinking eyes of the doll orient our attention towards the more 'uncanny' aspects of the plastic trash. Freud's exploration of the uncanny includes a passage that discusses Ernst Jentsch's *Psychology of the Uncanny*: 'Jentsch has taken as a very good instance "doubts about whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate"; and he refers in this connection to the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons' (1919: 6). Jamie's doll seems to act as a doubly uncanny figure. With her almost human appearance she no doubt triggers Jentsch's uncanny sense of possible animation, but seen through the lens of the new materialisms the horror is intensified by the realisation that she really *is* animate—formed of agentic, vibrant matter that will persist in the environment long after contemporary readers of Jamie's work are gone.

It is at this point that the description turns to contemplation of the particular significance of the different 'findings' for Jamie and her companions, as suggested by the items they select to take home: 'This is what we chose to take away from Ceann Iar: a bleached whale's scapula, not the door of a plane; an orb of quartz, not a doll's head' (2005: 60). These choices set Jamie pondering the subject of 'value'. She writes: 'The islands are a 21st-century midden of aerosols and plastic bottles, and I was thinking about what we'd valued enough to keep' (66). Her conclusion is that the orb of quartz and the whalebone are significant—and 'valuable' to their collectors—not because they are 'things that endured' (66), but because they have been 'transformed by death or weather' (66). They are things that can be seen to be subject to the same processes of material decay as the human body, albeit to different degrees. Now she reaches the realisation that 'endurance' has become a questionable value in the face of the durability of plastic matter:

> I wondered if it's still possible to value that which endures, if durability is still a virtue, when we have invented plastic, and the doll's head with her tufts of hair and rolling eyes may well persist after our own have cleaned back down to the bone. (67)

The doll, like Timothy Morton's uncanny 'hyperobjects' that 'do not rot in our lifetimes' (2010: 130), will transcend the personal death of its human observer, scrutinising, with her sea-blue eyes, the demise of the very beings that made her.

Thus, with the image of the doll's severed head, just as Macfarlane does with the severed *guga* wings, Jamie dramatizes a sign of strangeness that leads us to reflect on some of the meanings of our times, in this case the importance of recognising the value of

those materials that are transformed by death or weather, rather than the things that resist those transformations. Once again, it is the qualities of the islands that have been instrumental in fostering these thought processes, amplifying the strangeness of material juxtapositions and intensifying the meanings of those juxtapositions. Though Jamie is too self-reflexive a writer, too aware of the complexity of human relationships with the material world, for any hint of dogmatism in her work when it comes to commenting on our use of plastics, nevertheless her island-based writing raises important questions about human materiality and material 'value' that play into an ongoing investigation of the human animal and the choices we make in our technicity.

Satellites and the bird's-eye view

While the staring eyes and crazy hair of the doll's head render uncanny some of the results of human technicity, other applications of *techne* are seen in the literature of these islands as being relatively benign, even beneficial. Given the distinctly negative connotations of the 'wheel of the modern world' (Jamie 2012: 132) that broke St Kilda, it is perhaps a surprise to find that in Jamie's writing and in the other works studied in this chapter, certain applications of technology are seen as expanding the ecological imagination and leading to an enhanced sense of co-presence with the other creatures with whom we share the planet. One of these uses of technology, for example, relates to the tagging and tracking of wild animals. While on Rona, Jamie and her companions spot, through binoculars and a camera, a male killer whale with a crooked fin that appears familiar to her: 'I saw that this fin had the slightest of wavers, a slight S-bend and, as I looked, the voice in my mind said *I know you*' (2012: 201, emphasis in original). Having sent photographs off to be analysed by a researcher for the North Atlantic Killer Whale ID project, Jamie receives confirmation that it is probably the same whale that she had previously spotted off the Shetland Islands:

> A year and 180 miles separated the two encounters, but when on Rona, I'd focused the binoculars again on a stately, slightly wonky fin, and thought hello, chances are it was indeed the self-same animal. (208)

This discovery, made possible by a range of technologies, leads Jamie to articulate a powerful encapsulation of what Braidotti seems to be looking for when she calls for a postanthropocentric eco-sophical sense of community—the phenomenon she calls 'co-presence, that is to say the simultaneity of being in the world together' (Braidotti 2013: 169). With the understanding gained from her encounter with the whale, Jamie writes:

‘You just might be making the same journeys as these other creatures, all of us alive at the same time on the same planet’ (2012: 209).

There is a similar sense of enlarged understanding in Jamie’s account of what happens when she finds the body of a Leach’s storm petrel on Rona—a bird that has been ringed in a previous ornithological survey. As instructed by the tag on its leg, Jamie contacts the British Museum and fills in the details on their website so that the information can be passed onto the British Trust for Ornithology and processed. In due course she receives a print-out telling her that ‘the storm petrel had been ringed twenty-four years previously, not on Rona, where we found it, but 170 miles northeast of there, on the island of Yell’ (2012: 215). For Jamie, this response leads to an archipelagic epiphany—a technologically-mediated apprehension of interconnection—that raises the bird in her estimation:

> As soon as I read the letter, though, a connection shot between them [i.e. Rona and Yell]. Suddenly they were linked by a flight-path, straight as an arrow. I thought I knew my maps, but not as the storm petrel does. (216)

It is an insight that leads her to assess the practice of ringing birds in a positive light. Though she understands the kinds of objections to ringing that a purist who ‘carried a torch for “the wild” and believed in a pristine natural world over and beyond us’ (216) might raise, she asserts that the information she gains from the bird’s ring has ‘extended [her] imagination’ (216). She continues, ‘The ring showed only that it was wedded to the sea and, if anything, the scale of its journeyings made it seem even wilder than before’ (216). For this reason, she keeps the bird’s body ‘out of sheer respect’ (217). This insight implies a heightened appreciation of what the nonhuman animal body can do, heralding the development of a form of *zoe*-egalitarianism.

This perhaps unexpectedly positive assessment of technology is carried over into discussion of more sophisticated forms and applications such as satellites, photogrammetry and pulse-radar inspection. This phenomenon is perhaps least evident in Macfarlane’s work—he makes a point, for example, of stressing that the boat in which he sails to the Shiants is not equipped with GPS (Global Positioning System) (2012a: 88)—and satellites themselves are mentioned only twice in *The Old Ways*. One of these appearances is not actually in his account of the Outer Hebrides but in a description of sleeping out under the Chinese mountain Minya Konka. However, in both of these cases the technologies seem to blend almost seamlessly into the environment. Macfarlane writes, ‘There was a shooting star and then a satellite, winking across the darkness’ (2012a: 275). This contributes to a

scene that leaves the writer feeling a sense of 'deep calm and connection' (275). The other occurrence is in a passage where Macfarlane cites a poem written by the sailor Ian Stephens. For Stephens, the planning for each sea journey 'Is "affected by isobars,// the stationing of satellites, recorded ephemera/ hands on helms"' (98), elements that Macfarlane sees collectively as playing into the formation of sea-route songlines. In both of these instances, and with little comment, satellites and the perspectives they enable seem to have become an integral part of the fabric of travel and of the skies.

There is more mention of satellite technologies in *Sea Room*, where there is an immediate and explicit sense that they can help to expand the human ecological imagination, for example by linking the earth-bound human traveller with a global weather-world perspective. Nicolson writes: 'The sky was lifting. From a satellite, I would have seen the shifting of an eddy, the slight revolution of some huge cloud crozier turning on the scale of Europe, the planetary mixing of Arctic and tropical air' (2001: 43). Knowledge gained from the satellites also extends our knowledge and understanding of nonhuman creatures. As Nicolson records the passage of migrating Barnacle geese, he comments

> *From a satellite you could see them*, long skeins of the goose bodies, sewn like stitches into the air, travelling in family and in island groups, flogging north with the lengthening of the days. (132-3, emphasis mine)

Interestingly, in both of these instances Nicolson is imagining what he *would* see with a satellite's view rather than describing an actual image supplied by a satellite. In other words, he is not seeing this image at second hand as a disembodied cyborg only able to engage with the world via the mediation of technology. Rather, the bird's-eye view perspectives enabled by satellite technologies have worked their way into his embodied memory and imagination and increased their ecological reach.

The largely positive influence of these hyper-modern technologies is even more pronounced in Jamie's essays, from the uncommented-upon observation from 'Aurora'—'We see two shooting stars and a satellite journeying on' (2012:15)—to the detailed description of the 'laser-scanning, photogrammetry, and pulse-radar inspection' (2005:14) of 'Darkness and Light'. Once again, though, we see her engaged in a process of 'thinking through' the implications of these contemporary technologies throughout the course of the two essay collections—a feature of her work Deborah Lilley has characterised as a 'negotiation with her subject' (2013: 19). It is important to note that, from the start, and like Braidotti, she is fully aware of technology's more destructive uses and is certainly

wary of the kind of discourse that might suggest that it is necessarily a mark of the evolutionary march of human 'civilization'. A passage from her essay 'The Woman in the Field' resonates particularly strongly with Sebald's sense of the catastrophic recent history of human warfare, a history in which particular uses of technology play a significant role. Reflecting on human cultural endeavours and our status as a species 'obsessed with itself and its own past and origins' (2012: 69) she writes about archaeological practices:

> We know we are capable of removing from the sanctuary of the earth shards and fragments, and gently placing them in museums. Great museums in great cities – the hallmarks of civilisation.
>
> We are also capable of fire-bombing those cities, and melting their citizens to what Kurt Vonnegut called a 'foul stew'. (69)

Given this powerful encapsulation of human contradiction, it is perhaps no surprise that Jamie is cautious when it comes to discussion of the ways in which contemporary technologies are used to investigate human and animal life in the outliers of the Outer Hebrides.

The trajectory of Jamie's exploration also sees her engaging with some of the issues that troubled Westling, and led to her dismissal of the usefulness of the concept of the cyborg. Early in the collection *Findings*, in an essay set on Mainland, Orkney and focused on the Maes Howe Neolithic burial cairn, Jamie ponders the meanings and significance of the surveying work (by Historic Scotland) she finds going on in the chamber. As she enters, Alan, the guide, warns her, ''We're on the Web now, y'know […] Live' (2005:15).[14] One of the surveyors tells Jamie that enough data has been collected to create a virtual Maes Howe: '"You could build a replica of this, now," said Rob. "No, seriously, with all this data you could build an exact replica of Maes Howe"' (20). This causes Jamie to consider her own view of this kind of technological mediation. Thinking of our current environmental uncertainties she comments,

> And if it all goes to hell on a handcart, we have the data, we can build a replica. Maybe five thousand years from now we will indeed be living among replicas. We may be replicas ourselves. (25)

Her conclusion, however, suggests that this is not the way she sees the future going: 'It's not impossible. But I have my doubts' (25). Having resisted this transhumanist vision,

[14] A quick internet search proves this still to be the case. Sitting in my office in Worcester in early January 2015, I am watching three live feeds from the Maes Howe cairn on Orkney, one showing the still-bright day-time exterior and two focused on the empty, barely lit inner chambers (http://www.maeshowe.co.uk/index.html).

Jamie is able to draw an unexpectedly positive conclusion from the experience which transmutes the potential sense of modern disjunction from earlier ways of being human:

> I'd crept into Maes Howe at solstice, hoping for Neolithic technology; what I'd found was the technology of the 21st century. Here were skilled people passing light over these same stones, still making measurements by light and time. That thought pleased me. (24)

This observation adds a human-technological dimension to the sense of concurrent island time in the thesis. Manuel DeLanda, in *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History,* suggests that new human phases exist in conjunction with older ones 'coexisting and interacting with them without leaving them in the past' (2000: 16). Here the 21st century surveyors are seen as simply carrying on the same work begun five thousand years previously by their Neolithic antecedents, bridging the gap between the Stone Age and the Age of Satellites that initially seemed so catastrophic in the narratives of these islands.

It is this relatively benign interpretation of modern technology that largely informs Jamie's writings about its use in the outliers of the Outer Hebrides. In the final section of her tripartite essay 'Three Ways of Looking at St Kilda', she describes a third attempt to reach the archipelago, which this time results in a longer stay. She is able to make this journey by joining a party of surveyors from the Royal Commission of Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland who are beginning a major project. She writes,

> Over several visits across three years they intended to plot the entire 'cultural landscape' of the archipelago. Every last man-made structure on the islands would be surveyed with the latest GPS satellite equipment. (146)

It is an ambition that perhaps can be seen as reflecting once again the dreams of total knowledge fostered by the small island, and despite her broadly positive attitude to this kind of mapping, Jamie still initially retains some doubts, describing the surveyors' equipment as 'the wherewithal of the scientific gaze' (148). In its echoing of Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' (1975), Jamie signals that this method of viewing the world might be notable for its partiality and complicity in the perpetuation of unequal power relationships—both in terms of conflicts between this way of seeing and other cultural interpretations, and perhaps also in terms of the potentially dominant and domineering attitude to the nonhuman world it might be seen as encaspulating.

Nevertheless, the whole process holds a fascination for her. She describes her friend Ian and his collection of technological paraphernalia in some detail and observes: 'Perhaps it was his white beard, but when Ian strapped on the portable surveying equipment, he looked like a sort of techno-prophet' (2012: 153). As well as evidencing Jamie's interest in the technology being employed, this passage also introduces a figure to

the discussion that might help to rehabilitate the image of the cyborg in ecocriticism—not as the nightmare character from transhumanist fantasy that Westling rejects and Braidotti satirises, but as a perhaps more benign mediator between the human and the postanthropocentric future. Jamie's techno-prophet explains to her how the data-logger he carries works, and how it tells him how many NAVSTAR satellites are present overhead at any moment. She notes that,

> When Ian explained this to me, he used the language of stars, spoke about 'constellations' of satellites. He told me that to get a GPS reading you need at least four out of the twenty-four NAVSTAR satellites orbiting above you. With these in place, and with their readings fine-tuned by a small base station erected in the village, you could scramble all over the island, and pinpoint your position to the nearest centimetre. (153-4)

The '"constellations" of satellites' mentioned here suggest once again that these man-made structures have become an accepted, almost integral, element of the heavens. It is not the NAVSTAR satellites themselves that appear to bother Jamie so much as the almost obsessively minute focus of the scientific gaze: 'A centimetre? I was appalled. Too much accuracy! It was like pinning a moth to a board' (154). However, further explanation of these detailed scientific findings actually reinforces the sense already present in the islands of general flux and instability, as well as the notion that the pursuit of total knowledge only leads to more questions:

> But Ian went on to say that, actually, such precise surveying reveals that nothing is truly fixed. For example, when the tide comes in on the west coast, the whole UK landmass dips a little under the colossal weight of water. Furthermore, the UK is creeping toward Norway, just a fraction, year by year. The surveyors' equipment can detect these infinitesimal shifts. (154)

The passage hints, once again, that in the right hands technology might enhance the capacity of the human body to detect nuances in the nature of the planet that might otherwise pass us by.

Conclusion

The tiny, remote islands that form the subject of this chapter manifest forms of islandness that speak in some way to all three of the factors Braidotti sees as structuring the posthuman subject—'the new proximity to animals, the planetary dimension and high level of technological mediation' (2013: 72). Though these islands have been relieved of their immediate human concerns, meanings still snag and gather round them: they throw into relief aspects of human behaviour along with our conceptualisations of and relationship with animals; they act as frontiers to, and indicators of, global environmental

phenomena leading to reflections on different forms of materiality; and they highlight some perhaps unexpected aspects of technological mediation. While Jamie, in particular, does register reservations when it comes to the use of technology, she also brings a perspective to the Age of Satellites that suggests that technology might not always lead us away from our involvement in the biosphere. This perhaps reflects Bruno Latour's sense that the human combined with technology becomes a 'hybrid actor' (1999: 180). His example is that of a person and a gun, and his conclusion is that 'it is neither people nor guns that kill' (180), in other words technology cannot be considered to be a 'bad thing' *per se*.

As we saw in the introduction to the chapter, Westling's objection to the techno-human is that this posthumanist vision 'does nothing to address the dilemmas posed by a threatened environment, but instead implies that we can escape involvement in the rhythms of growth and decay in the biosphere' (2006: 29-30). Westling is quite right to identify these sentiments in certain discourses of transhumanism (see, for example, More 2013). However, the findings of this chapter suggest that there might be alternative discourses for ecocriticism to explore and develop when it comes to human technicity, and that the figure of the techno-human, and the notion of the cyborg as a fusing of human and machine, might be revisited and reframed in a more positive light. The use of technology on these islands to map animal populations, the sea roads of whales and seabirds, and the minute movements of both ancient man-made structures and the continents of the earth, might actually bring us to a closer identification with the biospheric rhythms of which Westling writes, and thus contribute to a potential (posthuman) reconfiguration and renegotiation of the 'human'.

Martin, writing of the St Kildan solan geese in his 1698 account of the island writes: 'Whither the fowls fly, and where they spend their winter, the inhabitants are utterly ignorant of' (1999: 258). Thanks to satellite tracking this phenomenon is no longer a mystery, having provided us with evidence of birds' extraordinary feats of exact navigation to and from parts of the globe that lie thousands of miles from these North Atlantic islands: a phenomenon that reveals an extraordinary more-than-human archipelagraphy. The knowledge with which these technologies have provided us suggests that we might yet take our measure from the flight of fowls, might utilise forms of human technicity to help us to understand to the best of our ability the significations of the more-than-human world and the astonishing things that animal bodies can do. They have shown how we might work towards a feeling of what Braidotti's concepts of co-presence, *zoe-*

egalitarianism and non-unitary subjectivity might entail, when we begin to see in our imaginations with the bird's-eye view of the satellite. Thus, in the literature that has emerged from the engagement of contemporary writers with these small islands at the edge of the world, we find a glimmer of hope that we might, after all, find ecological ways of engaging with the 'new situation we find ourselves in: the immanent here and now of a posthuman planet' (Braidotti 2013: 197). Ultimately, the use of technology—in evidence on these islands in many ways as a result of the opportunities for research opened up by the receding of the immediate tide of humanity—might be seen as revealing to us not just the connections between ourselves and other creatures but also the provisionality of the planet itself, in which continents sink and rise and islands slowly wander.

Conclusion

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
–Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* Act IV, scene I

From the good step to the posthuman planet

As stated in the Introduction, this research constitutes, to the best of my knowledge, the first thesis-length ecocritical study of islandness. Taking its cue from Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), the project has focused on an empirical part of the natural world—in this case, the island—in order to assess its place in the cultural imagination. I have endeavoured to draw from my reading of selected post-1960 island texts from the British and Irish archipelago a sense of the elements that constitute islandness in these places and the ways in which they emerge in the literary island imaginations of the authors studied. I have then considered the implications for ecocriticism of those findings, particularly in terms of what they reveal about the nature of human being-in-the-world. In its journey around four islands or island groups in the north-eastern Atlantic Ocean, the thesis has addressed the question of dwelling, investigated conceptualisations of the island as a natureculture and as an assemblage (exploring along the way notions of both harmonious material immersion and more dissonant forms of entanglement), and moved through to future-oriented, posthumanist perspectives. The findings of the thesis have, from beginning to end, supported Pete Hay's assertion that islands are 'special places, paradigmatic places, topographies of meaning in which the qualities that construct place are dramatically distilled' (2006: 31), and a large part of the research has been to investigate the specific ways in which this 'specialness' reveals itself, and to explore the tensions and challenges to which it gives rise. In the paragraphs that follow I outline the findings of each chapter in terms of the forms of islandness it reveals, the amendments to ecocritical theory it indicates, and the resulting overall contribution to knowledge it represents.

Overview of findings and contributions to knowledge

Chapter 1's discussion revolves around the 'good step', a motif Tim Robinson uses to explore the question of dwelling, and to encapsulate his quest both to take a step 'as adequate to the ground it clears as is the dolphin's arc to its wave' (2008: 20) and to arrive at a 'state of consciousness even fleetingly worthy of its ground' (20). I argue that Árainn is central to this endeavour. One significant aspect of the island's role is the way in which its 'immensities' and its ancient limestone rocks put Robinson in touch with the vast spatiotemporal scales that frame the narrative, enabling him to situate human dwelling within a context that stretches from the beginning of time to the horizon of the visible universe. I discuss the potential of this framework for mitigating the problems of 'scale' and 'framing' identified in contemporary ecocriticism, both in its bridging of the concepts of the local and the global, and in its bodying forth of expanses of time and space that, in their magnitude, often lie beyond the grasp of the human imagination. At the same time, it is a perspective that returns Robinson's attention—via a valuably deterritorialised viewpoint that resists nation-based identities and establishes far-reaching archipelagic connectivities—to the ground beneath his feet.

This is not to say that the enactment of the good step is simple or easy. The ambitions for the step are encouraged by the dreams of total knowledge that small islands inspire, and in its exploration of Robinson's performance of the quest, the chapter gives the first indication of many in the thesis that islands are resistant to encapsulation. However, as we have seen, Robinson is aware from the start of his quest of the delusory nature of his undertaking, but it is only through allowing himself the fantasy of the potential for total comprehensibility that he is able to devote such a high degree of attentiveness to the island. Thus the delusions of islandness and the actuality of the island work in creatively productive tension. Nevertheless, throughout the Aran diptych, Robinson struggles both to meet the challenge of recording the island's abundance of natural and human histories, and to reconcile consciousness with really 'being' in a place. These tensions give rise to a dialectical sense of dwelling that matches the interplay of groundedness and groundlessness, both literal and metaphorical, that Robinson experiences as he walks his island world.

The chapter's reading of the contingent, dialectical nature of the step represents an amendment to the conceptualisation of dwelling as involving 'notions of land and life existing in reciprocal harmony' (Wylie 2012: 366)—a view prevalent, though contested, in the fields of both ecocriticism and cultural geography. This reframing of dwelling in a

more fluid, uncertain form potentially rehabilitates it as a useful concept, especially when combined with further scrutiny of the 'human', for further ecocritical discussion. It also has an impact on the consideration of literary form. The task of expressing his innovative take on dwelling is one that moves Robinson beyond the bounds of existing forms of place-based writing. The books that result from Robinson's experience represent an intervention into rural landscape writing, psychogeography and, especially, island literature. They bring a gaze more usually associated with the great urban works of civilisation to a small island in the far western reaches of the British and Irish archipelago, and combine it with a searching look into the labyrinth of the human psyche. Adapting DeLoughrey's 'archipelagraphy', and drawing upon Robinson's deployment of formal features more usually associated with urban psychogeography, I have proposed the term 'psycho-archipelagraphy' for this form. I argue that the Aran diptych is a great work of island literature, and one that, particularly in its kinetic phenomenologies and performative qualities, might be recognised within island studies as a significant contribution to the exploration of islandness.

Chapter 2 applies theoretical concepts drawn from material ecocriticism to the consideration of the literature of Bardsey island, taking a naturalcultural view of the island and exploring the writers' immersion in a vibrant island world. The ways in which Brenda Chamberlain and Christine Evans respond to the agency and vitality of the island's more-than-human phenomena prompt my reframing of metaphor as 'more-than-metaphorical', and my corollary suggestion that 'metaphorising'—or 'seeing in metaphor'—is a means by which we might apprehend and express agencies and vitalities that resist representation in less imaginative forms of writing. Another aspect of islandness that arises here is the non-linear quality of island time—the way in which 'different presents' (Evans 2008: 126) seem to exist simultaneously as 'concurrent time'. This is a phenomenon that resurfaces in later chapters, and one that I identify as a form of island resistance to the conventional means by which we organise and measure our interactions with the world. It is a resistance that once again encourages more complex notions of the nature of human being-in-the-world.

At the same time, however, I argue that while the vitality of the island does indeed encourage and facilitate a heightened sense of the agency and vibrancy of the more-than-human world, the cultural tropes and associations, even if initially generated by the power of the island itself, exist in a sometimes tense interplay, disrupting the writers' relationships with the materiality of place. Thus the new materialist notion of

'choreographies of becoming' (Coole and Frost 2010: 10), and in particular its interpretation in the ecophenomenological strand of material ecocriticism, is here augmented and amended by the consideration of more personal, culturally-inflected 'chorographies' (a term used by Damian Walford Davies in his discussion of Brenda Chamberlain's work). In a form of naturalcultural enactment, the island's physical qualities can be seen as having given rise to its status as a spiritual place, a construction that has in turn impacted upon its materiality, particularly in terms of the ubiquitous presence of human remains in its earth. The argument of the chapter ultimately hinges upon the ways in which the two writers negotiate this powerful intertwining of the metaphysical and the material.

Chapter 3 carries out three readings of the Orford Ness episode in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn.* The first interprets Sebald's description of the Ness as a reworking (and disruption) of the *ubi sunt* trope, and as a response to Rousseau's account of the Île Saint-Pierre, representing overall a disavowal of the Romantic notion of the island idyll. I argue that this disavowal is compounded by Sebald's transposition of traces of the Holocaust onto the landscape. In this respect, Sebald's evocation of the Ness can be seen as a direct and powerful intervention into the discourse of islandness—a radical refusal of the benign possibility of peaceful seclusion on a geographically, historically and politically isolated island. The second strand of the chapter focuses upon the island as an assemblage and gives a reading of its 'storied matter', the elements of which are present in the landscape largely because it is (or rather, is considered or framed as) an island. I contend that one of the ways in which the objects in the landscape reveal their 'thing power' (Bennett 2010: xvi) is through the manner in which their affective intensity appears to build incrementally in the narrator-figure's psyche. The affective resonances of the Ness render it archipelagic in the broadest sense, demonstrating its implication in a global archipelago of stories that includes its association with the militarism that lies behind some of the worst horrors and catastrophes of 20th century history. It results in my putting forward as an intervention into ecocritical theory the notion of 'material affect', and arguing specifically that material ecocriticism should make space for the ongoing discussion of human interiority in its response to material agency.

The discussion of affect prepares the ground for the third and final strand of the chapter, which argues that the apparent 'melancholy' of Sebald's narrator-figure—a melancholy that threatens to overwhelm him utterly when he reaches Orford Ness—is not the pathological response of a damaged ego but a radical act of social and political

remembering that constitutes a refusal to accept dominant discourses of the progress of human civilisation. I argue that this has a performative function. By allowing the material elements of the Ness to speak their own history through the vehicle of the narrator's psyche, Sebald throws down a challenge to his readers to themselves take up the work of remembering and questioning. This work of melancholy remembrance, especially when read in the light of ecocritical queer theory, has a specific relevance for environmental concerns. With such remembrance comes the possibility of rethinking the 'calamity in progress', not only socially, but also ecologically. Throughout the chapter, I contend that the disruption of the tropes of islandness, the affective power of the scene, and this sense of resistance to overarching social discourses of progress, all take their force from their almost-island setting.

Some of the forms of islandness that emerge when the outliers of the Outer Hebrides come under scrutiny in Chapter 4 have much in common with those identified in the preceding chapters. The qualities of the islands and their surrounding seas reinforce archipelagic and aquapelagic perspectives, and reveal, once again, a sense both of deep time and of multi-stranded, concurrent island time. The chapter also reflects upon the ways in which the authors find themselves in a position in which they must navigate existing tropes of islandness. At the same time these islands accentuate features that are less prevalent in other chapters: they bring to the fore the nature of ecological flux, and focus our attention on signs of strangeness in their midst, fostering reflection on the meanings of the early 21st century. Two particular signs are identified. Discussion of the annual gannet (or *guga*) hunt on Sula Sgeir highlights the confusions of contemporary conceptualisations of animals at a point at which we are beginning to understand more fully through detailed scientific observation those extraordinary animal characteristics and abilities first intuited and observed by island-goers many centuries ago. A plastic doll's head washed up on the shores of the Monach islands gives rise to a contemplation of the strangeness of certain forms of materiality, and once again suggests an amendment to material ecocriticism: the need to recognise not just material kinship but also material difference, and to work towards a concept of 'material value'.

A further form of strangeness that emerges in these islands is the collision of epochs usually considered to be entirely separate. Jamie describes St Kilda as a place in which you move 'between the Stone Age and the Age of Satellites' (2012: 158). A surprising finding of the chapter is that the use of modern technologies on the islands is regarded (with some reservations) by these authors as relatively benign, and seen as

facilitating an understanding of the navigational capacities of animals and a renewed appreciation of their 'wildness'. Ultimately, despite well-founded misgivings about certain uses of technology, Jamie, in particular, sees the knowledge technology affords us as expanding our ecological imagination. These reflections cumulatively identify these islands 'at the edge of the world' as stepping off points for the future—sites that stimulate further consideration of the 'animal' and the 'human' and the interplay between the two.

Future directions for research

The impetus for beginning the research was, in a sense, and very much as Robinson explains his fascination with Árainn, its promise that the project 'could never reach an end' (Robinson 2007: 212). Given the richness of the literature of these islands, and the infinity of ways in which the islands themselves have exceeded encapsulation, this thesis is just a beginning, and it is my belief both that these particular islands and their literature merit further study, and that other islands in this archipelago will have equally fascinating and complex forms of islandness to reveal, all worthy of research. Because of my own lack of knowledge of Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Welsh, I have not attempted to study island literature written in these languages, or even in translation, mindful that these literatures will come with their own rich cultural and linguistic particularities. Therefore, I echo John Brannigan's statement of a 'desire for a 'fully polyglot' study of the archipelago, to which this Anglophone account is just one contribution' (2014: 9).

Moreover, there seems enormous scope for a study of islandness in this archipelago that reaches back in time, well before my starting point of 1960, and, equally, for research that brings an ecocritical perspective to the 'world of islands' (Baldacchino 2006) that lies beyond these shores, building on the existing work of postcolonial ecocritics and scholars such as Lisa Fletcher and Elizabeth DeLoughrey within island studies. As these scholars' work has already indicated, the novel—a literary form that has not been discussed in this thesis—offers particularly rich material for such analysis. A question that has arisen, suggested by the perhaps unexpected presence of sophisticated modern technologies in the literature of the Outer Hebridean outliers, is whether the increasing presence of technology combined with a more complex assessment of its value might be an emergent feature of other 21st century works of 'new nature writing' or island literature. Of particular interest from my perspective is the way in which this area of study may play into the development of ecocritical formulations of posthumanism that do not elide the nature of human

technicity or the possible value of technology in mediating and expanding our relationship with the earth.

Concluding remarks

The islands and island literature studied in the course of this research have proved extraordinarily valuable subjects for discussion, fostering insights that have led to a range of contributions to the fields of island studies and ecocriticism. Throughout the thesis I have identified forms of literary writing, including Robinson's unique psycho-archipelagraphy, that bring a profound attentiveness to 'that-which-would-be-known' (Hay 2006: 33) in the island worlds with which they engage. I hope that, by revealing the richness of the content of these texts, my findings might go some way to justifying the further study of literary accounts of islandness within island studies. In particular I have suggested that literary writing can be a site in which forms of islandness that have resisted articulation in more empirical and scientific discourse might emerge, sometimes by means of more-than-metaphorical formulations.

The findings of the thesis have confirmed the sense in both island studies and postcolonial literary studies that islands are peculiarly vulnerable to pre-troping—to cultural constructions that have an ongoing impact upon these places, sometimes, as in the case of Bardsey and Orford Ness, with significant material effects. However, following the lead of Kate Rigby, in her argument that to regard landscape as a 'blank screen for human projections' (2004: 13) is to consign nature to a position of passivity, I have also drawn out the ways in which the island's own qualities might have been instrumental in the generation of some of these tropes. At the same time, these islands have also revealed themselves to be resistant to being read solely through the lens of naturalcultural constructions. Hay identifies as a central faultline in island studies the question of 'whether islands are characterised by vulnerability or resilience' (2006: 21). For Hay the question revolves around political and economic issues—areas that have fallen beyond the scope of this thesis—but it is nevertheless relevant to this project and to my finding that, in the face of powerful tropes, even those in whose formation they have played a role, the islands studied here have proved resilient. They are disruptive to any overarching meanings applied to them, and able, as Robert Macfarlane says of Orford Ness, to suggest their own metaphors. This has been reflected in the sense expressed by the writers studied here of a need to monitor their own susceptibility to the pre-troping of their chosen islands and to find their own original relationship with those places.

The islands have not only been seen to disrupt the tropes with which they are associated, but also, fruitfully and creatively, to resist some of the theoretical approaches I have brought to them. Thus, while the perspectives of material ecocriticism have in one sense facilitated a range of observations on the qualities of islandness, the islandnesses that have emerged have thrown those approaches into critical relief. Bardsey can be seen to disrupt attempts to carry through a deep ecological reading of naturalcultural immersion on the island, revealing the potential tension between choreographies and chorographies and suggesting a need for the ongoing scrutiny of the interplay of nature and culture. Orford Ness reveals the power of material affect, a feature that suggests a further amendment to material ecocriticism, and reinforces the sense—present throughout the thesis—that there is a need for an ongoing scrutiny of specifically human subjectivities. The outliers of the Outer Hebrides raise the related question of material value, and foreground, perhaps unexpectedly in the context of nature writing, the ways in which technology might enhance the capacity of the human body to apprehend our co-presence with other animals. It is a perception that, ultimately, suggests a need within posthumanist ecocriticism to reassess the conceptualisation of the cyborg and to move towards a more nuanced version in which the human being is not so much fused with its technology in order to surpass embodiment altogether, but seen as engaged in creating and using technologies that potentially expand the embodied human imagination.

All of these questions of materiality, subjectivity and technicity are ones that are of interest not only to contemporary ecocriticism, but also to island studies. My hope is that this thesis might itself be regarded as a form of archipelagraphy—as 'a re-presentation of identity, interaction, space and place that proceeds as different combinations of affect, materiality, performance, things' (Baldacchino and Clark 2013: 130). Overall, then, the research has demonstrated, from a variety of perspectives, the importance of islands, confirming their status as places worthy of attention not only on their own terms, as complex and rich topographies, but also as sites for the consideration of broader ontological and epistemological questions. They are, as I suggested in the Introduction to the thesis, more than ever, 'good places to think with' (Gillis 2003: 25), particularly when it comes to consideration of the nature of human being-in-the-world. Harrison's forests seem to play a role in which they reinforce the discourse of humanism: they provide a measure by which we assess human institutions, but they do not challenge more fundamentally the concept of humanness. Islands, by contrast, seem to assist in an interrogation of the human *per se*. While for Harrison the forest defined the limits of the

human and at the same time provided the correlate of human transcendence, the island speaks to porousness, permeability, contingency, contradiction, and ambiguity and at the same time to material immersion. The same is true, by extension, of the archipelago, which as a model to 'think with' has enriched my discussion of, for example, the geological and cosmological trajectories of dwelling in Chapter 1; the points at which nature and culture interwine and at which they pull apart in Chapter 2; the far-reaching material/psychological effects and affects of militarism in Chapter 3; and the aeropelagic and aquapelagic journeys of the seabirds and sea mammals in Chapter 4, which potentially enhance the human sense of co-presence with the other creatures of this earth. Together, then, the island and the archipelago have provided a complex model which speaks to posthumanist understandings of both the nature of ecology and the human relationship with the more-than-human, thus providing invaluable sites for contemplation of the future.

Rosi Braidotti writes that:

> Human embodiment and subjectivity are currently undergoing a profound mutation. Like all people living in an age of transition, we are not always lucid or clear about where we are going, or even capable of explaining what exactly is happening to and around us. (2013: 196)

The research undertaken in this thesis has convinced me that islands are, and will continue to be, ideal places in which to consider these transitions of the human, and may assist us in coming to some kind of understanding of what is happening both to us and around us. Braidotti ends her book *The Posthuman* in a perhaps surprisingly upbeat fashion, with the exhortation that we must respond creatively to the challenge of the 'immanent here and now of a posthuman planet' (2013: 197). Echoing Shakespeare's island mage, she writes 'It is both exciting and unsettling to be reminded, almost on a daily basis, that we are, after all, such stuff as dreams are made of [sic] and that the new possibilities are immense' (197). I have no doubt that islands will play a significant role in our negotiation of those new possibilities, and that in the ongoing development of responses to the crisis of the imagination Lawrence Buell sees as implicit in the contemporary environmental crisis, the island imagination may have much to offer. *Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises.*

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Appendix 1

Figure 2: Mind-map of interconnections between islands and authors